

I'll See It when I Believe It

by Old Beginning New Ending

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Summary: Babysitting the Bennett kids isn't a problem, at least for Hiccup. The Guardian of Winter that seems to have taken an interest in him? That could be. FrostCup.

1. Sitters and Snow

Well, I never thought I'd be posting something here againâ€|butâ€|blame FrostCup.

****Disclaimer****: I own nothing but a laptop and certain plot elements.

Ages: Jack â€" 18 (in appearance), Hiccup â€" 15, Jamie and his friends â€" 9

* * *

><p>The snow drifted lazily onto the scene of dimming skies and white-blanketed neighborhoods; a classic atmosphere of nostalgia weighed heavily onto the onlooker. Green eyes traced a flock of wayward snowflakes as they skittered with unusual zeal, picking up momentum from the wind. He then caught sight of his young charge playing in the snow outside, excitedly chatting about with his friends, their voices stirring enthusiasm at the prospect of a snow day.<p>

The boy blinked, allowing an inkling of hope to well up in his chest, then shook his head. It would be a little too lucky of him for the snow to suddenly comply with his wishesâ€|it was off to school first thing in the morning then.

His first day in Thaddeus High.*

Hamish "Hiccup" Haddock III groaned at the prospect. Now, it wasn't that Hiccup detested schoolâ€|no, in fact he was an excellent

student. Sure, he had a bit of a tendency for his mind to wander to other things and interpret the world in his own way, but he still scored high marks in his studies. It was just that this was going to be his first official day in a new school, in a new town, in a new _country_. Moving from his hometown in Berk certainly brought someâ€|mixed feelings with him and his father, but he knew it was for the best.

They packed their bags and settled into an American suburb in Burgess within a week's notice. The town was not at all the same as the speck of land smack dab in the Meridian of Misery (as he calls it); as far as he could feel, the winters weren't as fatally-freezing as the little island, and the people were kind and amiable, especially the Haddock's neighborsâ€|the Bennettsâ€| in sharp contrast to the majority of Berk's tough and tasteless citizens. No, as far as Hiccup was concerned, this place was pretty okay.

Definitely different, but okay.

â€|And not just because of the new change in scenery and the change in pace; there was something elseâ€|

A round of gasps followed by squeals of delight broke through the small compare- and-contrast session in Hiccup's mind.

The boy peered out the kitchen window, eyes widening at the sight of the rather impressive and towering snowman in the middle of the backyard surrounded by Jamie and Sophie as well as the other neighborhood kids.

"Huhâ€|well that escalated quicklyâ€|" he murmured with amusement. A thought occurred to him as to how so much snow built up to make the seven-foot snow-creature in the first place, but he shrugged off the thought; he really did daydream too often for his own good. He'd have to be careful though. He can't be so irresponsible now that he claimed the role as the Bennetts' new babysitter.

With that in mind, he decided to take a step out into the cool, crisp air and praise the kids in their remarkable effortsâ€|and to keep a closer eye on them.

.

"Jack!"

The ice-spirit chuckled as the kids crowded around him, bubbling with eagerness at seeing the Winter Guardian once more. While it was great traveling around and finally knowing who he is and his purpose, it was great to be back home in Burgess and seeing his first believers again.

Plus, it was pretty sweet being able to make flashy entrances like thatâ€|and getting due credit for it. After all, one does not simply create the paradigm of snowman in all of snowman history out of thin air like that. Much less stand on its head as well.

Unless you were Jack Frost of course.

"Hey kiddos!" He swung his staff over his shoulder, a grin on his lips as he looked to each child's eyesâ€|"glimmering with

anticipation. "Well since I'm here, you know what that meansâ€" "

"SNOW DAY!" the kids shrieked in unison.

It was a bit ear-splitting, but Jack could never get tired of hearing that and knowing that he brought joy and fun into children's lives. He stopped that train of thought right there, though; there's no way he'd get all mushy about this again. Jack leaped down onto the plush, cold, white earth to join the kids in their games. For now, he'll enjoy bringing Burgess a little belated Christmas gift:

An extended Winter Break.

Jack felt a small tug at his jacket and turned to an ecstatic Jamie, looking absolutely thrilled to tell him something. Jack raised a brow in amusement before finally relenting. "Are you going to tell me or am I going to have toâ€" "

"Jack, guess what!" The boy seemed ready to explode from anticipation.

He snickered. "I dunno Jamie, whaâ€" "

"Jamie's got a new babysitter!" Pippa interjected. "Just moved here last week!"

'_Hmâ€|wellâ€|didn't see that one coming'_ Jack mused. "Oh reallâ€" "

"Yeah, he's from _Europe_!" Monty explained. "From Berk to be exact and he's reallyâ€" "

"Coolâ€|" Cupcake sighed.

There was a break of silence.

She glared. "_What_?"

"Uhâ€|well he's pretty cool, I guess." Caleb shifted away from the girl and towards his brother.

"Yeah, but he is kinda dorky too," Claude remarked. "He is nice thoughâ€|_way_ better than your last babysitter."

The troupe shivered at what appeared to be a rather traumatizing time in their young lives.

"Okayâ€|?" Smile never leaving his face, he turned to the house and caught sight of a figure by the window. His eyes narrowed as the silhouette shifted, as if broken from a trance, or as though he had seen somethingâ€|or knew he was being watched. Jack's curiosity was piqued; he hadn't seen the kids this excited since the first time they met all the Guardians. "And just what is Mr. Babysitter's name?"

"H'cup." Sophie, shyly peeking out from behind Jamie, tottered over to the winter sprite.

At that, Jack had to chortle. "Hiccup?" He patted the girl's head

affectionately. "What kind of name is that?"

"Well, his real name's Hamish, but he said that everyone called him Hiccup in his hometown," Jamie explained. "He said something about Viking tradition. He's great! You should meet him, Jack!"

'_Well this guy just keeps on getting more and more interesting...'_
Jack turned his attention to the door, his smile twisting to a devious grin as he swung his staff in his hands. "Viking, huh? Well, is Mr. Big, Strong Viking scared of a little snow or something?"

"Not exactly," Monty quipped.

"On both parts of that sentence," the twins mumbled.

"He got a phone call from his dad a while back," Pippa clarified.
"He'll probably join us soon."

Jack made a sound of acknowledgment as his eyes narrowed to the turning of the door. "Oh, this'll be good..." "Let's see just how cool he is."

Jamie didn't quite like the mischievous look in the Guardian's eyes. It usually meant a power outage or a miniature avalanche in his own backyard. "Uh Jack? What're you doing?"

"Oh, just having a little..." When the door opened, an icy blast of air and a flurry of flakes surged towards the unsuspecting victim.
"...fun."

In all honesty, Jack was just wanted to test the waters with this guy, to see how much fun he could have with him. A prank isn't a prank if he doesn't get the right reaction, after all. It wasn't like he knew that the guy would just walk out of the house with just a light sweater and a vest on in early January. So he did feel slightly guilty.

That is, until Hiccup seemed to completely ignore the sheer cold torrent of wind that would have normally sent an ordinary person off scurrying to the nearest heat source. Instead, the babysitter smiled and waved at the group, completely oblivious and unfazed by the previous onslaught.

"Hey guys!"

Jack didn't know whether to be relieved, impressed, or put out. Well, at least it means this Hiccup can play in the snow without much problem.

"Hiccup! Aren't you cold in just that?" Jack tried to ignore the discreet nudge sent to him by Jamie as the boy innocently inquired the teen, gesturing to his attire.

"Hm? Nah, the cold doesn't usually bother me." Jack was about to roll his eyes in slight annoyance until he actually looked at the other boy.

Jack wasn't one to wax poetry and wouldn't waste his breath on superfluous clichés about someone's hair or eyes.

(like the boy's auburn hair that seemed to glow red under the snow-light at early dusk, or his eyes, a shade of viridian richer than any he'd ever seen, or the miniature constellation of freckles that dotted across his cheeksâ€¦)

But he had to admitâ€¦"Hiccup" was _damn_ cute.

"Having lived in Berk has its perksâ€¦snowing for nine months and hailing the other three kinda makes this weather seem a bit more tame than what I'm used to." Vivid green eyes seemed to meet Jack's for a second and the winter spirit swore his heart skipped a beat. "But still ample enough snow to make an awesome snowman, I see."

Jack tried not to seem crestfallenâ€¦"because he wasn't. He was used to others seeing right through him and though he had gained a few more believers, there were still a lot more people that the newest Guardian remained invisible to.

Jack was, however, a little astonished when instead of phasing right through him, Hiccup instead hesitantly sidestepped the Guardian and approached the frost-monument.

He whistled lowly, even more impressed up-close. "You all made this by yourselves?"

"We, uh, had help," Jamie answered evasively.

Hiccup snickered. "Got ol' JÃ¶kul Frosti to pitch in, huh?"

Jack felt his heart lurch. "What?"

"What?" the kids parroted, each exchanging nervous glances.

"JÃ¶kul Frosti? You knowâ€¦Harbinger of Winter, nature spirit, embodiment of ice and cold?" Hiccup cocked his head. "In English and, er, more modern versions, he goes by the name Jack Frost."

The Guardian's jaw dropped.

"Jack!" Sophie gleefully recognized.

Jamie, from the corner of his eye, could see Jack openly gawking at Hiccup. Sometimes invisibility did have its perksâ€¦"Oh yeah! We know about him. H-how'd you know about Jack?"

Hiccup smiled softly, a visage of happiness flawed by an unnamed emotion in his eyes. "Oh, Viking tradition. I heard stories about him all the time when I was young because of how cold it was back in Berk. My mom used to warn me about the whole 'nipping at your nose thing.'"

Jack tried not to seem offended when Jamie and his friends giggled.

"Wait, soâ€¦_Jokul Frosti_?" _Monty_ awkwardly pronounced.

The teen nodded. "JÃ¶kul Frosti." Jack ignored the way his face heated up at the sound of such a foreign yet familiar name spill from the boy's lips. "In Old Norse, his name means 'Icicle Frost'â€¦and

apparently, he liked to cause a lot of trouble for a lot of people, mostly for fun."

Again, Jack tried not to seem too offended when the group laughed; the teen was, after all, right on target.

Pippa, still grinning, couldn't help but to ask: "Sounds like you know a lot about himâ€|ever wished you could meet him?"

(Jack would then later on come to deny that he chocked upon hearing that.)

"Oh definitely," Hiccup drawled. "I'd like to personally thank him for all the times I've slipped and fell on my butt from the ice and the mounds of snow I've been buried in after walking outside for five minutes at Berk." Smirking, Hiccup continued. "But actually, yeah. It might be cool to meet the legendary personification of winter and youthful folly."

The children smiled, tentative and covert, and Hiccup can't help but feel like he was left out of some inside joke.

Moments later, they all insisted on playing for at least another hour before heading back inside, dispelling the fluttering unease in the air. For now, spheres of frost were catapulted through the air as vivacious youths engaged in icy-warfare as the babysitter fled from the siege.

And during this, Jack leaned against his staff, replaying Hiccup's words in his head. "Well, there's something you don't hear everyday," Jack murmured. This Hiccup knows exactly who he is from legend and doesn't seem to be lying to the kids about wanting to believe. And he still can't see Jack? The sensible part of him (and yes, it exists!) guesses that Hiccup probably doesn't believe in him at all and only said that to placate the children. That was something Jack was used to hearing, especially from parents. Yet there was another part of Jack, a stubbornly insistent faction in his brain, telling him that there's more to it than that.

It was only when Hiccup inadvertently held Jack's gaze again when the teen took cover behind Jack's newfound creation as the kids ran amuck that Jack ultimately opted for the latter theory.

There was something definitely interesting about this kid.

â€|And no, it definitely isn't just the fact that Jack finds Hiccup slightly attractive.

* * *

><p>*= the town Burgess was named after its founder, Thaddeus Burgess. In all honesty, I didn't want to name the high school "Burgess High."<p>

There will be some more things explained in the later chaptersâ€|if there are any later chapters.

-posts, runs, hides- Sorry if it sucks. I haven't done this in a long time.

2. Fortune and Felines

Back by popular demand!

-ahem- Well nowâ€¦I didn't actually think anyone would like what I wrote. Huhâ€¦the world works in strange waysâ€¦ Anyways, I want to thank everyone who read the first chapter, whether you reviewed it or not. Thanks for all the support, everyone. I am sorry to say that I don't know if I'm able to do faster updates.

Warnings for cursing.

****Disclaimer:**** I own nothing but a laptop and certain plot elements

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><p>The other children had long departed, leaving only the babysitter, his two charges, and (unbeknownst to the former) a curious ice-spirit that scrutinized the other teen's every action. Eyes of blue traced each soft sigh, exhale, or word that drifted to the air carried along with it wisps of white as the snow outside continued its dizzying descentâ€¦<p>

In torrents.

Now while the snow day to extend the holiday break was definitely part of Jack's planâ€¦the freak blizzard out of nowhere was definitely _not._

The Guardian didn't have to turn to see Jamie shooting curious glances at him; it was, after all, quite unusual for Jack to just stand there in silenceâ€¦in the middle of Jamie's living roomâ€¦in the middle of a snowstorm that he made. He watched Hiccup pace around the room, cell phone pressed to his ear as rapid and foreign words* flew out of his mouth in worry. Jack suppressed the urge to groan. Okay, so yeahâ€¦ three hundred years and he still had a few kinks to work out with his powers. Things like this still happened when he got a little too excitedâ€¦

(And no, not in _that_ sense.)

The lights flickered again, causing Jack to wince and send an apologetic look to Jamie. The boy in turn gave him a relenting smile as he held on to his little sister in comfort.

Hiccup sighed and pocketed his phone. He approached Jamie with a weary smile, eyes tinged with anxiety.

"I just got off the phone with my dadâ€¦it looks like the roads are completely iced over." Jamie nodded with understanding as Hiccup slumped onto the couch beside Sophie, currently huddled in a blanket for warmth. He let out an exhausted chuckle. "I had to beg for him to just stay put at work until it's safe. I know that the winters here aren't as bad as Berk, even in this weather, but it's still too dangerous to drive." He shook his head, the action heavy with concern. "Another thing about Viking traditionâ€¦we certainly inherited some stubbornness issues."

Crawling over to Hiccup's side, Jamie tugged his blanket over both of them. "It's all right. I'm sure it'll let up soon. Or, at least I'm sure everyone'll be safe." A hopeful glance at Jack's direction kicked the Winter Guardian's guilt into overdrive.

Hiccup smiled and drew both Bennett kids close, mindful of Sophie who seemed to have drifted off to sleep already. "Thanks Jamie. I'm sure everyone'll be fine." He paused in thought for a second. "Well, since your mom's basically in the same boat as my dadâ€¦so what do you guys do after having dinner?"

Jamie beamed. "Wellâ€¦mom usually lets me stay up pretty lateâ€¦"

Jack smirked as Hiccup fought not to smile. "Oh? Just how late?"

"'Till midnight!"

Jack snickered. "Clever."

Hiccup pretended to think it over. "Well, I dunno Jamieâ€¦even _I_ don't stay up _that_ late."

"That's 'cuz your dad says you're a talking fishbone and you need more sleep to grow."

Hiccup reddened while trying not to sputter indignantly "Thank you for summing that up."

"And he said you need to eat more," Jamie pointed out.

Jack, juxtaposing the other teen, doubled over in laughter. "Haha! Brilliant!"

"I'm kidding, I swear! I'm sorry." Hiccup frowned, but accepted the apology, blatantly ignoring the too-wide smile stretched on Jamie's face. "Mom just lets me and Sophie play till about an hour before bedâ€¦then we get into our pajamas and she reads Sophie a story. Sometimes I get to read one too." He grinned as Sophie slowly roused from her sleep. "What about you, Hiccup?"

"Iâ€¦well usually I read for a bit and draw. Then I clean up after Toothlessâ€¦andâ€¦" Jack jumped back in shock as Hiccup practically bolted from the couch and scoured the room for his boots. Tugging them on, Hiccup looked back to the startled children. "Sorry Jamie, I'll be right back. Please watch Sophie for me until I return!"

Jack raised a brow. "Toothless?"

"His cat," Jamie whispered to the Guardian before turning his attention back to the teen by the doorway. "Hiccup!"

"Toothless doesn't like being left alone all day and he'd never forgive me ifâ€¦wellâ€¦" He sighed shook the thought out of his head. "I'll be back; don't worry. I'll just be right next door." And with that, he swung the door open and shut it close, only allotting a few small mounds of snow to puddle on the rug.

Jack frowned. "What was that all about?"

Jamie fixed the blanket around his sister while focusing on a memory made not too long ago. "Toothless is really protective of him. His dad told me once that Toothless saved his life and ever since then, Toothless hasn't left Hiccup's side." A soft whine from Abby served as a reminder. Jamie padded over to the greyhound and petted her head affectionately. "Hiccup couldn't bring Toothless over 'cuz he and Abby don't really get along."

"Huhâ€|" Jack wondered audibly. "But is going out into the snow to pick up his cat really all that necessary?"

Jamie laughed. "A little. Toothless always looks out for him since Hiccup gets into a lot of accidents. His dad always says so anyways."

Jack thought that through for a moment. The kid definitely seemed the type to get into all sorts of trouble, albeit unwittingly. He seemed so _fragile...er, frail. Yes, he meant frail. A talking fishbone. For a second, a tremor of worry welled up within him, but he quickly dispelled it; it was just snow, right? The kid would have to be pretty unlucky if he hurt himself out there, not twenty feet from Jamie's house.

"And Hiccup's kindaâ€|danger-prone too."

Jack paled. "Uhâ€|Jamie?"

"Hm?"

"I'll be right backâ€|"

A gust of chilly air later and Jamie was left standing in the room. The boy sighed and hopped onto the couch, the greyhound following suit. "Teenagersâ€|" Beside him, Sophie mumbled incoherently, but Jamie just assumed that she agreed.

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Hiccup was pretty glad that no one back at Berk could see him now, face-flat on the snow for the umpteenth time as the wind picked up. True, while he had faced worse back at his hometown, that didn't mean he was any more graceful. Gritting his teeth and straggling to his feet, Hiccup shiveredâ€|but it wasn't from the cold.

From the corner of his eyes, there was nothing but blinding white and dusk. Yet he still couldn't shake off the feeling that someone was thereâ€"

Watching him.

A sliver of fear raced down his spine but he eased the paralytic emotion out of his system. He just needs to focus on getting to the front door and to his bedroom where Toothless was no doubt lounging about, awaiting his friend's return. Rightâ€|priority; that's what he needs. Stumbling a little, Hiccup got to about three feet before his foot caught on something buried in the snow and face-planted onto the cold, wet earth once again.

Behind him, Jack could only sigh and try not to seem too amused.

"Wow. This guy's a walking disaster."

He watched the boy as he picked himself up again, shaking the snow off of him before continuing forward in his (apparently for him) perilous journey. Jack narrowed his eyes as a glint of silver amid the snow caught his attention. Stooping down as within another two feet, Hiccup managed to somehow evade gravity through a series of whirling arm movements to keep him balanced, Jack picked up a house keyâ€”no doubt necessary for Hiccup's little operation.

Jack tsk'd. "Where'd you be without me, kid?"

While Hiccup was distracted by a gust of wind that "just so happened" to blind the boy for a second, Jack blasted an open path for the boy to trudge on. Upon finding the frosty walkway, Hiccup's eyes nervously shifted from left to right before tensely continuing on.

"You're welcome," Jack drawled, key still in hand, as he floated behind the boy.

Upon approaching what was probably Hiccup's front porch, Jack thought that now would probably be a good time to slip the key back into Hiccup's vest pocket. Well, it was the opportune moment before Hiccup almost elbowed him right in the gut.

"Damnit, where'd I put that keyâ€”"

Jack snickered. "You better not say that around Jamie and Sophie."

Checking his front pockets, the boy only met with frustration. "Shitâ€”"

"That tooâ€”"

Now reaching his back pocket did Hiccup really moan out some interesting noises of irritation. "_Fuck."_

"Yes, definitely that one as well," Jack said airily. "What a dirty mouth you have~"

When Hiccup seemed on the brink of panic, Jack caved in and proceeded to inch his way towards the boy to place the key back inside the vest pocket. However, as fortune would have it, Hiccup chose that moment to move his arm to begin his search all over again.

It was only for a moment, but that was all Jack needed.

Hiccup emitted a strangled noise-hybrid of triumphant cry and a yelp as he located the key in the crevice of his pocket. He jammed the key in the slot, turned, and ran inside, slamming the door shut behind him.

Jack just stood there, frozen, because for that one momentâ€”
their hands touched.

.

Hiccup, as soon as the door slammed, was immediately attacked with a pounce of four paws to his chest and a rough, padded tongue on his face. He smiled as he scratched the black Norwegian Forest's chin, feeling his friend purr from his touch. "Hey bud. Missed me?"

The cat mewed, nuzzling closer to his human.

Hiccup smiled, stroking the cat's silky fur. "Okay Toothless, I know you don't particularly like Abby, but please bear with me for just tonight, okay boy?"

The cat replied with silence, curling up to Hiccup in acceptance. Hiccup gave him a short pat before opening his vest to allow the feline some buffer from the snow and cold. Thinking for a moment after feeling the cat pressed up against him and noticing for the first time how wet his clothes had gotten from the snow, Hiccup decided that he should at least bring a change of clothes.

Jack was jolted from his previous stupor as Hiccup threw the door open and slammed it shut once more. The ice-spirit gave a bit of distance between them, still eyeing the boy with bewilderment. He noticed that Hiccup brought with him a small backpack and a little bundle of fur peeking out of his vest—a little bundle of fur that started yowling and hissing once toxic green eyes met Jack's.

"Toothless? You okay, bud?" The cat struggled to defend his human from the specter, but Hiccup was having none of that. It wasn't that Toothless hated the snow—but it was the water it later became that Hiccup had trouble with, despite Toothless's fondness of it.

Jack didn't know whether to laugh or sink further into his confused state. "Geez, what's with this? First you and now your cat?" Another violent hiss and a reprimand later from Hiccup though the boy nervously eyed where Jack remained, and Jack settled for laughing. "Heh, can't _wait_ to meet your folks, Hiccup."

Apart from the occasional growl from Toothless, the rest of the trek over to the Bennett household was pretty uneventful. And by that, Jack meant that Hiccup didn't trip at least once. Jack thought back to what Jamie had said earlier and guessed it may have be a subconscious thing; maybe Hiccup felt a bit more confident in his steps now that Toothless was there—

Jack shrugged off the thought. Maybe he was reading too much into it (and yes, he's capable of that too).

When reached the door, Jamie swung it open to let both boys inside. "Saw you coming from the window," Jamie explained. He beamed when the cat jumped out of Hiccup's clothes and onto the floor, stretching his body languidly now that the cat was surrounded with heat from the home. "Hi Toothless!"

At the sound of that dreaded name, Abby dashed from the couch and into the safe recesses of the kitchen. Jack gave Jamie a puzzled look while the boy giggled. Sophie, excited to see the pretty feline again, ran to him to stroke his fur. Meanwhile, the greyhound whimpered, feeling a little betrayed.

Hiccup sighed. "Toothless, you draconic little creature—can you

please stop terrorizing those bigger than you for once?" The cat in question mewed innocently, but Hiccup wasn't buying it. Nevertheless, the teen smiled fondly at the cat. "I swear you have a Napoleon complex of some sort." The cat only puffed out its chest in pride. Hiccup laughed, "Yeah, yeah, it works for you, I know."

Jack cocked his head to the side. "Well, that isn't something you see everyday."

"I'm sure they'll learn be friends one day," Jamie consoled, scratching behind Toothless's ear.

Hiccup smirked. "Yeah, sureâ€|" Murmuring under his breath, he added, "â€|the day me and Snotlout have a drink of yak-nog together during Snoggletog."

"What's 'Snoggletog'?" Jack asked aloud.

"What's 'Snoggletog'?" Jamie echoed.

Hiccup stilled awkwardly. "It'sâ€|"erâ€|"Jamie could I use the spare bathroom to take a shower? It's, uh, getting a little uncomfortable in these wet clothes." Because it wasâ€|and he really didn't want to explain _that_ Viking holiday to Jamieâ€|especially when it involves exploding eggs for some odd reason.

Jamie nodded. "Go for it."

Pouting, Jack followed him down the corridor. "Hey, you didn't answer the question! And what the heck is a '_Snotlout'_'?"

"Hey, Jamieâ€|do you mind if I borrow a towel too?" Hiccup called.

"Sure! They're in the hall closet to the left!"

Still frowning, Jack decided it was best to let that one slip by; he'll just ask Jamie to pester Hiccup about it later. Besidesâ€|

Now was his chance to tell Jamie what happened with him and Hiccup.

Turning around, Jack stifled a yell when he Toothless blocked his pathâ€|with a rather menacing expression he might add.

The feline's pupils narrowed to slits, crouching low to the ground as if ready to attack. His fur stuck to his body and warning hisses that bared sharp fangs informed Jack that this cat wasn't scared of himâ€|no, he was warning Jack, an admonition of an imminent attack.

Jack took a hesitant step back, unsure how he found himself in the position of the common mouse. Sure he could defend himselfâ€|but he doubted Hiccup would have been pleased to find his precious cat encased in ice. He could just fly over him too, but that would raise quite a few questions as to why Toothless was chasing after air. When his back met a door, Jack guessed it was better to play on the defensive. Not waiting for another sinister hiss from the ferocious feline, Jack quickly turned the knob and slipped inside.

You'd think that after battling against the Nightmare King himself that Jack would've been able to keep his cool even under extreme conditionsâ€|

"Toothless, is it really necessary for you to stand guard out here?"

Jack gulped as he heard a relenting sigh from the other side of the door. "You wantâ€|what? Okay, okay, fine. You can stay inside while I shower."

When the knob started to turn, Jack started to panic.

Hiccup entered and flicked the lights on; Jack could only curse Fate. Of course he picked the bathroom by accident. Of course, because Jack Frost just has that kind of luck. Toothless, the evil thing, glared at Jack as Hiccup closed the door and _locked it._

This time it was Jack that made a strangled little noise, a cross between a cry and a dry whine. He tried not to be too freaked out by this. Of course not. He's Jack Frostâ€|the epitome of 'cool'. He'll just slip out once Hiccup's in the shower and make sure to close the door in time so the malicious little demon wouldn't follow him. Besides, it's not like he wanted to stay.

'_It'll be fine. Nothing to worry aboutâ€|'_

And then Hiccup started to strip.

Jack felt his face heat up and his breath shorten.

Oh shit.

* * *

><p>â€|Maybe I should increase the rating later onâ€|

(Oh God what have I done.)

*= I guess I made Hiccup from Norwayâ€|and he speaks Norwegian, since it does descend from Old Norse. And Toothless is a Norwegian Forest Cat, which may have been brought to Norway by Vikings.

3. Valentines Special

I want to wish everyone a Happy Valentines Day! (Or Singles-Awareness Day...whichever one you prefer). Anywho, I uh...made a little something. (Geez I can't believe I'm posting this.)

****Disclaimer:**** I own nothing but a laptop and a certain plot elements.

****Before you read this****:** ****Right now, this has **nothing to do with the storyline**.** I just had a little extra time on my hands and decided to post something on Valentines (or Singles-Awareness) Day. I can't say that this will never happen in the actual story, nor will I say that it will be _in_ the actual story, should it progress that far or should it develop to that stage. So if you prefer the pace and uh...innocence of how it is right now, ****I suggest not reading**

it**...It's...**Rated-M-ish**.

Whatever**. Here's some smut. **(...Jack "tops")

* * *

><p>WARNING: Deviates from current storyline; this is just an extra for those **who want it.**

Heated lips muffle the other's quiet groan, cold fingers trace along feverish skin, leaving trails of goose bumps and blushes in its wake.

Snowflakes continue to dance in the winter's chill.

Soft whispers of sweetness and nothings are drowned out by breaks of gasps, sharp intakes of breaths, and short, broken prayers.

The billowing wind echoes through the dark room.

It's so cold outside, but oh so very _warm_ between the two as sweet kisses develop addictive flavors and once-innocent mouths are plundered with sinful tongues as fingers grasp, search, and bruise with mindless grip to find purchase in the other's flesh. The room is dizzying in its heat, night like a shroud for them to do as they please, desire as they want, and to act thoughtlessly, carnally.

At the back of Jack's mind, he registers that he's losing control too soon and too fast, and he doesn't know what exactly the consequences will be, but the flavor of Hiccup is too heady in his tongue and the feel of the other's skin beneath his is too right that the one underdeveloped and annoyingly responsible part in brain is screaming at him to _stop_, everything else about him is screeching at him _don't ever_.

For Hiccup, he's long gone. His mind short-circuited sometime ago, between the first (or second, or third, or fourthâ€¦) kiss Jack placed on his lips, and when icy (wander-lusting) hands encased him in cool warmthâ€¦or maybe when Jack found that spot beneath his ear that the Winter Guardian teased and abused until Hiccup was reduced to hiccupping broken variations of the other's name.

There were two very pretty and very prominent marks visible on Hiccup's neck, three very curious and eager fingers of Jack's playing at the hem of Hiccup's waistband, and four feet of snow outside the house.

(Jack was, after all, quite prone to losing control when he got _excited_.)

Through the nature of his body, he learned to be averse to heat, but the fire that sang in his veins was a whole different matter all together. Hiccup's cute reactions and the wonderful flavor of the boy's kisses and skin forced sensations of desire to overtake his mind, fueling a part of him that desperately yearned to mark and possess the other boy. It was novel and exhilarating all at once and god, Jack never wanted it to end, especially with all the sweet noises Hiccup made that goaded him onâ€¦

Jack leaned down further, taking in the sight of the third mark he

made on his boyfriend's neck, visible for everyone to see. It was absolutely breathtakingâ€”seeing _his_ boy, trembling beneath his frame, a pretty blush adorning his cheeks and highlighting each precious little freckle, eyes glazed over with want for him alone, his neck littered with his marksâ€”

Hiccup moaned out Jack's name and in that moment, a thought triggered a series of sirens in his head, alarming him. He wanted Hiccup. He wanted him _now_.

"J-Jackâ€”" Hiccup bit his lip to muffle the embarrassing noises that threatened to steadily rise in volume...

* * *

><p>And then Jack woke up.<p>

Sorry.

(Hides)

4. Moments and Melodies

To start things off, I have this to say: I need help. Lots of it.

I honestly never thought that so many people would enjoy this storyâ€”and now that there areâ€”I don't want to be a letdown. Soâ€”uhâ€”I've always been a little timid on this site, but I need someone I can bounce ideas off of and to help me edit. So if any of you out there are willing to offer this poor wretch some guidance, that'd be deeply appreciated ;;

I want to thank all those who read this story; you can't possibly know how much it means to me to hear that people actually like the weirdness that spews from my brain.

****Disclaimer: ****I own nothing but a laptop and certain plot elements

* * *

><p>Jack Frost is not a pervert.<p>

(Inch by inch, the articles of cloth were shed to reveal smooth flesh, decorated with charming freckles delightfully dotting the taut expanse of his shoulders and back; a lean torso was left exposed in its wake with tantalized orbs of blue trailing the slim curvature of the younger's waist. Roving eyes halted at the slight jut of the boy's hips where silk skin met coarse fabric wrapped dangerously low in teasing censor. Top pulled off and haphazardly thrown to the floor two feet from where the unintended voyeur presided, the Winter Guardian's anticipation budded for the main courseâ€”)

Jackson Frost did the right thing by covering his eyes.

(Soft footfalls were gravely exaggerated in the confines of the enclosed space; the shower had turned on after a series of squeaks and a gurgle of gushing water from the pipes. The distinct metallic clink of a buckle in the process of being undone and unwound made

Jack swallow as he tried to focus instead of Toothless's warning growls. Nevertheless, consciously or not, his ears strained to pick up one certain noise: the sweet melody of denim hitting the floor. Not a moment later, between a feral hiss from the feline and the hiss of the curtain's rungs was the frost spirit gifted with the opportunityâ€¦)

Jackson Overland Frost did the wrong thing by peeking through his fingers.

(Only to have it slip through said proverbial fingersâ€¦)

He didn't know what was worse: the fact that Hiccup already jumped behind the shower curtainâ€¦or that he was actually disappointed by it.

Toothless purred in contentment, probably gloating in success of safeguarding his human's virtue. Jack merely scowled at the sordid creature while ignoring the evidence of his own perversions written in red all over his cheeks.

Chancing a glance upon the shadowed outline against the barrier between them, seemingly oblivious to the Guardian's presence, Jack relaxed a bit. While it still raised questions as to what exactly transpired between him and Hiccup outside not too long ago, at the very least, the younger teen wouldn't have to freak out at the sight of an awkward Frost-Spirit in his charge's bathroomâ€¦watching him showerâ€¦and cowering from his overprotective cat.

In Jack's defense, he would like to say that this wasn't the strangest situation he'd ever been in.

Now that Hiccup was safely behind the curtain and more importantly, behind Toothless, the cat began to scrutinize the strange being before him. Backed up into a corner and seemingly unable to attack, the cat approached his prey with a flick of his tail. Curiosity driving him, something that got all cats in the end, the feline pressed forward, sniffing at the humanoid's odd scent of winter and pine. Gently placing his front paws on Jack's leg to lean closer to the Guardian's face, rounded orbs of green examined the pallid boy.

Jack, unused to the intense inspection and unsure of what to do, hesitantly reached to pet the subdued beast. Irises of ice-blue clashed with toxic-green and the cat huffed, shrugging away the touch to retreat closer to the showering form though his eyes never left Jack's face. The defensive stance read in bold letters "DISTRUST," though Jack guessed it was still progress from "LOATHING."

Baffled by the cat's odd behavior, Jack's eyes shifted away from the brooding feline to his owner's outlined figure. A growl erupted from Toothless's throat, audible enough that even Hiccup called to his cat in worry. The cat mewed in response to the familiar voice but still held his gaze against Jack's. With the Winter Spirit's eyes settling on the cat, Toothless appeared much more restrained than before, yet still wary.

Jack frowned and leaned his head against the door, eyes now shifted to the ceiling.

'_Oh greatâ€|so the little demon thinks I'm a lecher and doesn't want me looking at his master.'_

The thought sparked some amount of amusement in him, yet a small part of him died with the smallest acknowledgment that the situation did indeed call for it. Head lolling off to the side in slight boredom, Jack started to hum a little tune, at least to pass the time by before Hiccup got out of the showerâ€|and to keep his thoughts away from seeing Hiccup getting out of the showerâ€|

"_Baby it's cold outside*_

Baby it's cold outside

Been hoping that you'd drop by

I'll hold your hands their just like ice

Beautiful what's your hurry?

Listen to that fireplace roar

Beautiful please don't hurry

Put some records on while I pourâ€|"

"The neighbors might thinkâ€|"

Jack's eyes comically enlarged.

"Sayâ€|what's in this drink?"

Jack was caught between a panic-attack and a fit of laughter. All the while, Hiccup sang in and out of tune, timid voice almost completely overpowered by the sound of water against tile.

"I wish I knew how

To break this spellâ€|

I ought to say no, no, no sir

At least I'm gonna say that I tried

I really can't stay"

" _Ahh but its cold outside!"_ they sang in tandem.

Jack smiled, finding the situation far too unreal to even laugh at the perfect irony it was for the subject of the song and that Hiccup chose the female's verses.

"I've got to go home "

"_Oh, baby, you'll freeze out there"_

"Say, lend me your coat"

"_It's up to your knees out there" _

"You've really been grand"

"_Your eyes are like starlight now"_

"But don't you see"

"_How can you do this thing to me?"_

"There's bound to be talk tomorrow"

"_Think of my life long sorrow"_

"At least there will be plenty implied"

"_If you caught pneumonia and died"_

Jack smirked, finding this song far too familiar for his taste.*

"I really can't stay"

"_Get over that hold out"_

"Ah, but it's cold outside!"

"_Oh, baby it's coooold ouuuutsiiiiide!"_

Sure it was a bit grandiose for their softer rendition of the song, but it was in Jack's nature to be just a little bit theatric. Besides, if he said so himself, it didn't sound half-badâ€|

Unfortunately, Hiccup did not share his views. Actually, to say that Hiccup was startled would have been an understatement; to say that he freaked the fuck out would have been slightly more accurate. He shrieked at a rather earsplitting volume and stumbled rather painfully in the shower and Jack was pretty sure he accidentally smacked himself against the tile. Sounded like he dropped a bar of soap too.

"Wh-what? W-who's there!"

To be fair, it seemed as though Jack shared a similar state of panic; he was just a bit better at staying still than the other boy.

A fearful and slightly curious head peeked out from the curtains and eyes of green caught Jack's gaze and widened, mostly from fear, partly from awe. "H-hello?"

Call it a cosmic moment, the burst of spontaneity and chance meeting in a fiery collision dated by fate as the world ceased its titled rotation; a moment of defining verity amid seas of opportunity and actions both taken and lost; a moment born of romanticized clichÃ©s and sardonic ploys at the tragic expense of two doomed souls; a moment of complete and utter dumb luck coinciding with the tangled breadth of the world's natural and complex designâ€|whatever it was, Jack was utterly spellbound because Hiccup was _looking right at him._

And of course, nothing could have made it worse than Toothless lunging at Jack, the furious, furry creature not liking at all the

way the strange Ice-Child was looking at his humanâ€|

Except maybe the power outage that "broke the spell" not one second after their "moment".

(That one could be blamed on Jack and his excitement.)

Still, it gave Jack ample time to unlock the door amid the confusion and, in Hiccup's case, the miniature-seizures derived from the events that just took place. Toothless roared after him (as much as a cat could roar at least) yet Jack was pretty sure he shut the door fast enough to ensure that the feline didn't escape. From within the bathroom, Jack could still make out the sounds of Hiccup's erratic and nervous behavior, completely warranted, and Toothless's calming mewls to console his frazzled friend.

Jack sighed and almost collapsed against door, willing himself to calm and to refocus. After a few meditative moments, the lights flickered to life once more, much to Jack's relief (and probably Hiccup's too).

Then he caught sight of Jamie and Sophie at the end of the hallway, Sophie appearing calmed now that it was bright again, and Jamie with a worried frown on his face and a questioning look in his eyes.

Jack tried not to seem at all defensive. "Yes?"

"Uh Jackâ€|?"

Jack grinned, desperately trying to stave off the anxiety that threatened to drip from his words. "Hm? Spit it out, kiddo."

"Did you cause the blackout?"

Jack cringed, "Yeah. Sorry, you see, I was in the bathroomâ€|"

Jamie blinked. "â€|You were in the bathroom?" Even Sophie seemed to stare at him with incredulity in her one visible eye peeking from her jagged fringes.

Jack closed his mouth and seriously considered never opening it. Ever. Again.

Jamie started once more, this time with more caution. "â€|Were you in the bathroomâ€|"

"â€|uh," Honestly, Jack didn't think it through very well in the scenario in which Jamie decided to be blunt with him.

"â€|with Hiccup?" Jamie finished with a raised brow.

Jack, for the life of him, could not think of a better excuse: "It wasn't my fault."

Jamie, for the life of him, could not help but to shake his head with a single giggle trilling from his lips. "That's still really creepy."

Rolling his eyes and turning away so both kids wouldn't hear his red-faced remark, Jack doggedly murmured, "Yeah, yeahâ€|still wasn't

my faultâ€¦I blame the stupid cat."

"Again, that's still really creepy."

Sophie joined in her brother's giggling.

.

As soon as the room was once again illuminated by the sweet clarity of fluorescence, Hiccup towed himself off as fast as he could (minding the newly formed bruises) and dove for his change of clothes. Toothless stood, ever diligent, by Hiccup's side as the boy slipped on his pajamas and sweater. Nervously, his eyes darted this way and that, still vigilant of theâ€"whatever it was that happened to be there earlier, but it seemed to have snaked away into the darkness as soon as Hiccup's whole world turned black.

The typically-rational teen tried to shake off the very irrational and persistent thoughts in his head that pressed for him to backtrack and figure out what the hell just happened.

In truth, Hiccup wasn't really sure what he heard or what he saw for that matter. He didn't even know what prompted him to start singing along to that tune he heard not so long ago on the Christmas station that played on the radio all last week. But somehowâ€¦the tune just drifted into his head, swirling amongst the vapors and intermingling with his wandering thoughts. Thenâ€¦he heard that echoâ€¦

The echo that did not belong to him.

His breathing became labored and Hiccup concentrated on warding off the dark spots that littered the corners of his vision, even as terror started to flood his system. Toothless nuzzled Hiccup's leg, tail wrapping around a slender ankle in comfort. Thankful for the affectionate display, Hiccup leaned down to scratch beneath Toothless's chin, just the way he likes it.

He then paused at the sight of the door, horror rising to his chest, mouth agape in raw fear.

The lock was undone.

* * *

><p>*= Yeahâ€¦they just shared an "Elf" moment. The song is "Baby it's Cold Outside" and it did kind of correlated with the second chapter. And incase if anyone was confused, the italics were sung by Jack and the regular font was sung by Hiccup<p>

I honestly wondered why I never saw a parody of it done for FrostCup/HiJackâ€¦

(This is why I need helpâ€¦)

5. Fables and Fingers

I'm really glad that people want to help me out on this storyâ€¦it's reassuring to know that they care and quite relieving that others

think that I'm doing just fine. Again, I want to thank everyone who reads this story for their support.

I'd also like to apologize for the inconsistent intervals between updates; again, it all depends on my school schedule.

****Disclaimer: ****I own nothing but a laptop and a certain plot elements.

* * *

><p>It was Toothless's consoling coos that grounded Hiccup from his fit of hyperventilation; the Norwegian Forest pawed at the hem of his sleeping pants as feline pupils rounded with worry. Taking in a gulp of air, Hiccup hefted the cat into his arms and calmed himself as Toothless purred against his chest. His body had gone cold with dread but it definitely helped to have company right now, especially if that company happens to be a furry, miniature furnace.<p>

Staying still for a few moments, Hiccup was caught in the cross-fire of how he should act after what had just happened not five minutes ago, weighing out the pros and cons on whether or not he should check himself into a mental institution.

On one hand: since the middle of the day, ever since he walked outside to meet with Jamie, Sophie, and their friends, he felt something watching him. It wasâ€|unsettling. He'd felt it again when he was out in the snow to get Toothless, especially when he was searching for his keyâ€|

Hiccup shook the thought out of his head, but a fragment of a memory rooted itself firmly to the forefront of his conscious. It was only for a moment that, just as he was sure he had already checked that pocket, something solid and frigid had brushed against his fingers. It was startling, to say the least, and though he ignored it in favor for more pressing matters, the same foreboding feeling had yet to escape him completely. And just thenâ€|when he peeked out of the showerâ€|

It was hard to explain what he saw.

On the other handâ€|isn't this the sort of thing he used to live for?

The other teens at Berk had ostracized him for his constant daydreaming and the folklores that never truly left his head. His dad used to complain all the time about it; he was usually frustrated when he took Hiccup fishing and all Hiccup did was scour the area for trolls.* A lot of people, namely his own family, worried that he would shut reality out entirely in favor of his own little fantasies that danced behind his eyelids. After a few hard years of adjusting to adolescence, logic had chased away old legends.

But this was nothing like when he was thirteen.

He had felt it, had heard it, had seen it. And he had a feeling, a vexing turbulence in his mind that just couldn't let go of those secretive smiles of the children, that he wasn't the only one in this house that had experienced it all too.

Toothless jumped out of his arms as Hiccup took a breath and opened the door; he felt a wintriness, a dull throbbing in his bones from an invented cold but shook it off. He rounded the corner in search for answers.

It was time to have a talk with Jamie.

.

Jack loved kids. It was one of the perks of being a Guardian: to see their smiles, from the tiny grins that lit up their faces to beams that stretched from ear to ear (teeth showing and all), even when they couldn't see him in return.

This, however, was getting a bit aggravating.

He huffed indignantly once more as Jamie stifled yet another childish giggle with Sophie.

"Guys, c'monâ€¦gimme a break, will ya?" He groaned when he received twin bursts of laughs from the Bennett siblings. He had a feeling that it was a bad idea to tell them everything. Sadly, he rarely listened to that one annoying part in his brain that always seemed to be right.

"Sorry Jack. It's justâ€¦a little too weird, yanno?" Jamie grinned. "Jack Frost: Guardian of Funâ€¦defeated by Toothless the Cat!"

"That was hardly a defeat!" Jack rebuked, just a tiny bit offended. "And besides, Hiccup did say that the little beast had a Napoleon Complexâ€¦"

At the sound of his babysitter's name, Jamie perked up. "Oh yeah, so you think Hiccup really saw you? I meanâ€¦you said he kinda freak out when he saw you outside the shower, so it's a possibility right?"

The Frost Spirit sighed and leaned against his staff. "That's the question I've been trying to figure out all night."

Jamie looked at his sister and when all he got in return was an equally confused stare, he glanced back up at the Winter Guardian. Granted, Jamie didn't know Jack for very long or see him all too much because of his duties, but that still didn't take away from the fact that Jamie had never seen Jack quite soâ€¦thoughtful before. The jovial spirit was always bouncing off the walls, fast-paced, and eyes always set on the next adventure, yet here he was: a pensive entity, seeming dazed and utterly lost, hesitant to meet either the hope or disappointment dangling by spider-silk before him.

Jamie bit back a smile; he had a sneaking suspicion that all this meantâ€¦

"You like him."

There was much sputtering and red-faced nonsensical words that splurged from the Ice Spirit's lips, but Jamie was pretty sure that he heard the phrases, "Huh", "What makes you say that", "How could you even" and "That has nothing to do with this," in wild exclamations.

And amidst all this, the hesitant call that barely carried itself through the air made Jack pause and look to the doorway.

"Jamie?" Hiccup called again.

"I'm in my room, Hiccup! Sophie's here too!"

"H'cup!" Sophie cried.

Jack, if questioned, would deny that his heart started beating erratically when his ears picked up the sound of light footsteps making its way upstairs.

He'd also deny to Jamie that he flushed red when Hiccup peeked through the doorway, clad in loose pajamas and a too-big sleeping shirt. Toothless, at his heels, narrowed his eyes at the sight of Jack, but did nothing else.

"Hey guys, how bout a story before bed, hm?" His lips lifted at the corners to form a crooked smile as the siblings cheered.

The Frost Spirit softened his expression at the scene; he'd definitely get along with Hiccup at least.

"What story?" Jamie was scrambling to pull the covers over him and Sophie as Hiccup pulled up a chair beside the bed. "Do you have any cool ones from what you heard as a kid about Vikings? Or how 'bout that awesome story you made of Toothless as a dragon?"

Toothless's disposition brightened at the honorable mention. Jack merely cocked a brow and chuckled. _'That certainly suits the furry fiend.' _

"Hm," parodying a pondering expression, Hiccup put a finger to his lips before his eyes settled on the two's excited looks. "I mean, that's fine and all, but I tell you guys enough about Berk as it is," he laughed with an off resonance. "How about you tell me a story, Jamie?"

Caught off guard but pleased all the same, Jamie scratched his head, mentally searching for a good story to tell his babysitter.

"Uhm how about that sighting of Big Foot last week? Or that one about the sailor running into Nessie?"

"Or how about Phil, back at North's?" Jack drawled. "Heard he got that huge promotion last week. He's the envy of all the Yetis at the workshop!"

Jamie tried hard not to make it too obvious that he was elbowing air. However, laughter from the Winter Guardian stopped altogether from the next sentence that left Hiccup's mouth.

"How about you tell me a bit about Jack Frost?"

Eyes of Arctic rime fixated upon the sheepish teen, heartbeat spiking along with the blood rushing to his cheeks. A near intolerable excitement blazed through his blood but was drowned out by the quickened pace of his own breathing when Hiccup's gaze met his once more, rich viridian glimmering with curiosity and flickering with

uncertainty. It lasted for a second or two before those vibrant eyes returned to Jamie with a nervous quirk of the lips and fiddling fingers.

Jamie feigned confusion (fairly well for a nine-year old). "Well, you already know a lot about Jack."

If Hiccup noted the familiarity in Jamie's voice to the name, he didn't show it, but something told Jack that the boy was taking careful note of what Jamie was saying and what he actually meant.

Hiccup shook his head. "No, not really. I know about _JÃ¶kul Frosti_ "Old Man Winter." This time, it was Hiccup that gave Jamie that clandestine look. "But you know that name as someone else, a _different_ Jack Frost. I'd like to know just who that person is."

Jamie nodded, expression concealing a muted but bubbling joy.

And Jack, though near trembling with exhilaration, couldn't help but sulk a little at the old nickname that he had thought long buried beneath centuries of misconstrued fictions and misinterpretations brought about by terminology lost in translation.

" '_Old'?"_ Jack whined.

•

And so Jamie wove his tale, fables erupting from memories and breathed to life through gesticulations and essential hyperbole. It was Jack's tale, a personal narrative of the Ice Spirit brought upon by the Man on the Moon's design, and retold in endearing fashion by the only two people he had ever gifted with the knowledge of the Guardian of Fun's creation. His death was a birth and his victory a new beginning; he had no regrets and only reminisced in small but healthy amounts.

So now the third person to have ever heard his tale listened with rapt attention, partly in disbelief, partly in amusement, and mostly in silent wonder. He idly wondered if Hiccup could envision his misadventures that finally brought him to where he was now—or if the babysitter merely sat through the ramblings of a child with an overactive imagination of a make-believe frost spirit.

"â€¦so he found his center and became the Guardian of Fun. Now every winter, he brings snow and joy to the world around him to keep each child smiling through the harsh cold, and to keep them laughing when it matters the mostâ€¦" Jamie yawned, sinking further into his pillow. Beside him, Sophie had already dozed off, small fingers clutching the sleeve of the aforementioned Guardian's jacket.

"And remind them to enjoy what life has to offer, right?" Hiccup leaned over and tentatively draped the covers up to their chins and tucked in each child.

"Rightâ€¦" The boy's eyes started to droop, lips upturned and contentment emanating in cozy warmth. "G'night H'cupâ€¦"

"Good night, Jamie. Good night, Sophie," Hiccup whispered. Steady

fingers brushed messy fringes from their foreheads in an oddly paternal fashion before those green orbs were focused on Jack for the fifth time since their meeting. They held their gaze, resolute and unwavering, a silent beckoning, and an unspoken signal.

Hiccup stood from his seat, careful not to disturb the slumbering feline by his feet and slipped out the door. Jack gulped and gnawing anxiety evolved to biting apprehension, but he nonetheless accepted the quiet request; Hiccup did, after all, leave the door open for him to follow. He pulled away from Sophie and trailed after the enigmatic teen, not bothering to close the door behind him.

When he reached the bottom of the steps to the living room, Hiccup stood in the center, nervously shifting his weight from his right and left foot. Jack was debating on what to do to get the teen's attention, or at least to alert him of his presence, until Hiccup shattered the tense lull of night.

"I-I know you're thereâ€|" Hiccup opened his mouth again and paused. Yep, Jack could definitely tell that Hiccup wasn't a very good public speaker. "Iâ€|you were, weren't you? This whole time, I mean."

Jack stepped towards him and halted once Hiccup flinched. It was a phantom of an ache that blossomed, almost nonexistent yet it echoed through his body in fear and discouragement from proceeding.

Hiccup was soundless for what seemed like an agonizing lifetime before his voice broke through the building calamity about them. "This is crazy, you know?" This time, it was Hiccup that took one trepid step towards him. "For years, parents spoon-feed their children with these fantastic stories to protect their innocence and to teach them morals and virtue, to gear them towards this ideal of how the world should beâ€|and yetâ€|" His hand began to tremble and Jack wasn't quite sure if he should fight that annoying feeling of trying to comfort the boy. "They throw that bucket of water over you when you reach that certain ageâ€|and tell you that everything they told you before was a lie. That there's nothing to believe and that stories like that are only meant for young minds who can't handle how the world really is yetâ€|Yetâ€|" He looks upâ€|

And a shadow appears before him, not completely opaque, only a little menacing, and wholly intriguing.

"Yetâ€|you're here." Green eyes shimmered with unbridled emotion of an unknown name, something akin to adrenaline rushing through his system. "Andâ€|" he lets out a breathless chuckle and Jack can't help but to restrain himself from doing something absolutely stupid. "You defy everything that I had to learn and it's absolutely _crazy._"

Gingerly, he lifts his hand, not quite daring to touch the unspeaking entity. He lets his fingers curl and unfurl meekly, timidity encompassing his character as he looked away.

"But you existâ€|"

Jack's breath caught and there's an obnoxious swell in his heart that he tries to will away but can't find the capacity of control to be able to. Instead, unthinkingly, he mirrors the other's movements until their skins were a wind's kiss away.

"I know you do."

It was a simple action: the entwining of fingers and palms meeting in a contrast of temperature. It was simple. It was everything but. It was gentle warmth ebbing into ice; it was a soothing chill that eased the turmoil. It was the torrential flood of realization and incredulity; it was a spark, igniting hellfire that sung in their veins. It was a tranquil instant on the exterior; it was eternity raging in blooming intensity within the blanketed slates of their minds. It was fire, it was ice, it was insanity

It was magic.

* * *

><p>Way to break the ice, Hiccup.<p>

*= Something that Hiccup apparently did, as stated in the movie. Also mentioned was that Hiccup had the attention span of a sparrow something that I found incredibly cute. I hope people actually find the other HTTYD references in this story

Some parts of Hiccup's past are mentioned. I just hope I didn't give everything away already.

(Again, sorry for everything in this chapter, especially for that last line.)

6. Almosts and Atmospheres

I know I say this every chapter, but it must be said: I can't thank you all enough for reading this story. I'm very serious. All your encouraging words have given me the confidence in myself that I lost a while back; you all had a hand in helping me earn my 1st place in my academic writing competition last Saturday. So, in short, thanks.

Also, I want to thank all the anonymous reviewers. I wish I could speak to you all personally, whether it's about the story or just for fun, because I do feel bad that I can't reply. Seriously, you all are awesome.

****Disclaimer: ****I own nothing but a laptop and certain plot elements.

* * *

><p>It was an instant of absolute stillness, the echoes of the heartbeats of two singing out of metronomic rhythm. Jack supposed he was the first to break out of the enthralled trance, releasing a shaky breath he held that fluttered as flakes in an icy dance towards the darkened air; he was the first to look at the boy with auburn hair, turned away from him, exuding both faith and fear; it was the first time that Jack saw just how young he was how young and utterly afraid he was of letting go of this moment of letting dreams die to dust in the wake of the cruel monochromatics of reality.<p>

And Jack shared that fearâ€”that fear that the boy's fingers would slip through his and forever becoming a mere phantasm of a wintry night in a dark household.

In assurance, to both of them, Jack squeezed their fingers together, his heart skipping a beat when the boy pressed back but he ignored this for the sake of the moment. Amidst the muted pandemonium that ravaged his thoughts, a breathy exaltation passed his lips: "I'm here."

The other boy lifted his head in response, slowly facing the Guardian with a wonder-eyed expression that contrasted with a small smile. Their hands lowered but never lost connection and in an earth-shattering, breath-stealing, mind-blowing, and heart-stopping second, Jack almost gave into the compulsion to do something absolutely _stupid_ as the two boys shifted closer togetherâ€”

Almost, that is untilâ€¦

"Hiccup! Jack! I can't believe it! You two areâ€”whoaâ€¦"

Jamie eyed the two awkwardly as the two boys gawked back with equal shock and mortification.

The boy blinked. "Are you two holding hands?" What followed after Jamie's interjection was a small episode of disentangling fingers, hasty backtracking, wild exclamations, and gesticulations that all read a very defensive and very unconvincing "NO!"

Jamie giggled and rushed over to them, beaming at the teens. By this time, Hiccup had calmed down after suffering from a small heart-attack and knelt down at Jamie's level. "Hey, I thought you were supposed to be asleep?" Because Frost Spirit in the living room or not, Hiccup was still the babysitter.

Jack, not too dejected that his and Hiccup's small moment was over, merely sighed and ruffled the kid's hair. "He's right. Sandy wouldn't want me messing with his Dreamsand's scheduled visit." He grinned when he saw Hiccup stiffen, more than likely already processing too much impossible information for one night.

He pouted. "Butâ€¦c'mon Jack! I mean, it's not every day you get a new Believer." Jamie grinned at Hiccup. "And it's not every day that this new Believer happens to be my babysitter either." Hiccup was about to open his mouth but the over-ecstatic nine-year-old beat him to the punch. "Did you guys properly introduce yourselves?"

The teens shot each other puzzled looks.

Jamie shook his head. Grabbing both of their hands, the boy forced the two teens in a clumsy handshake. "Hiccup, this is Jack; Jack this is Hiccup! Go on, say hello!" He ignored the dubious looks and insisted for the greeting to commence with an enthusiastic smile.

"Errâ€¦Hi, Jackâ€¦Frost," Hiccup stumbled lamely, a little befuddled at the turn of events. "Or do you prefer _J         Frosti, _orâ€¦?"

Smirking lightly and disregarding that strange lurch in his chest at the sound of his other name coming from the boy's mouth, Jack shook his hand firmly. "Nah, Jack's fine."

It took perhaps five seconds for them to notice that their hands were still in the other's grasp before they both pulled away.

Turning to Hiccup, "Now that that's all settledâ€¦" Jamie then proceeded to launch a variety of rapid-fire questions. "So, how'd you see him? How'd you know it was Jack Frost? Did you actually see him when you were in the shower?" (Poor Hiccupâ€¦his cheeks burned a bright pink at the reminder.) "You believe this, don't you? Oh, you're not going to tell my mom about this, right? But if you do, I don't think she, or your dad, will believe youâ€¦oh andâ€¦"

"Jamie?"

Three heads turned to see little Sophie by the doorway, clutching an unamused Toothless, glaring holes at the Ice Spirit that stood a little too close to his human friend. The little girl trotted over to the small gathering in confusion and curiosity while Toothless struggled to be free of her hold to protect the younger teen.

Hiccup rolled his eyes. "Well the gang's all here."

A pitiful whine from Abby from the kitchen followed by a warning-hiss from Toothless begged to differ.

Jack, unknowing of what to do, merely laughed along with the kids.

.

It took a while to convince the Bennett siblings to march to bed after the excitement (little Sophie shared her brother's enthusiasm at the prospect of having their beloved babysitter share their friendship with the Winter Guardian), but with a bit of prodding and the enticement of explanations as to how all this happened in the morning, the elder two goaded the younger two to head off upstairs.

So as Hiccup tucked the children in once again, Jack leaned over and experimentally rested his hand on Hiccup's shoulder. The boy barely shivered at the cold contact despite the thin material of the large nightshirt.

Hiccup did, however, sigh. "What a nightâ€¦" He said this with a small smile playing at his lips; that was enough to give Jack the initiative to throw his arm around the boy's small shoulders. Hiccup winced at the sudden weight but said nothing of it.

"You got that right." Jack really didn't need to see Jamie to know that the kid was probably giving him some funny looks right about now. Still, Hiccup didn't shrug off the contact, so why not? He did, however feel a little compelled to retract his arm after a girlish giggle from Sophie.

"Hiccupâ€¦you'reâ€¦acting pretty calm about this whole thing," Jamie mused. "How come?"

Hiccup discreetly adjusted himself, probably as an indication for Jack to move his arm; the Ice Spirit did not comply. "Wellâ€¦I'm not sure really. I guessâ€¦" he let out a soft laugh. "I guess I've kinda been waiting for something like this to happen..." _'Either that or I'm still in shock'_ but thankfully, he didn't voice that out loud.

Jack was fairly sure that he was blatantly staring at the boy's profile now, zeroing in on the green eyes that refused to meet anyone's gaze. Again, that vexing emotion stirred something in his chest. "What do you mean by that?"

"Iâ€¦guess I never really stopped believing." Hiccup scratched his chin. "That's a bit weird, huh?"

"Weird but awesome!" Jamie qualified. "Seeing Jack Frost in the flesh and not jumping to conclusions and calling the cops is a sure sign of it!"

"Thank you, Jamie," Jack drawled.

Hiccup smiled, and although Jack hadn't known him for very long, he could tell that whatever joy he was trying to fabricate for the sleepy but happy children didn't quite reach his eyes and didn't quite fool the Winter Guardian, or the feline curled in his lap.

"It's already getting late," Hiccup murmured offhandedly.

Jack hummed in agreement. "He's right. You two better close your eyes and sleep tight, else Sandy won't give you two any good dreams for tonight," the spirit sang with a teasing edge in his voice.

The siblings giggle and a ghost of a smile flashed across the other teen's features, but even the latter's soft display did nothing to deter Jack's suspicion. Hiccup turned off the lamp and Jack withdrew his arm to bid the children a final good night. With Toothless already dozing off, Hiccup figured that it was best to let his furry friend rest in the enveloping warmth that the soft blankets and the two drowsy children were emanating. Petting the feline with demure contentment, Hiccup felt the little creature purr with appreciation and affection as he settled himself at the foot of the bed.

"G'night, bud." Turning to the Bennetts, Hiccup bade them the same. With tired but happy eyes, the Jamie and Sophie nodded before a calmed lapse of silence in the darkâ€¦soft and even breaths followed soon after and the babysitter sighed. Whether it was out of satisfaction or out of respite, he didn't quite know.

Jack in the meantime fixated his attention to the window, watching in mild awe at the arrival of the Dreamsand, golden grains that gifted each slumbering child with aspirations and fantasies in swirling and spiraling elegance. The luminescence juxtaposed with the obscurity of midnight, dazzling in its design and operation. Jack shook his head; it really was too bad that no one was awake to seeâ€¦

Oh. _Right_.

"Hey, Hiccup," Jack whispered, excitement seeping into his voice.

Slivers of moonbeams spilled through the glass and the flare of gold that snaked through the winter wind outlined Hiccup's lithe figure and accentuated green orbs that shone with intrigue and a flicker of bemusement. A sunburst of light decorated the night sky with visions of dreamscapes and wishes, its fantastic display erupting from the innocence and imaginations of the children of Burgess; it was a gorgeous sight—not that Jack would know. He was too busy staring at how each ray of light painted the Bennett babysitter in stunning palettes.

Hiccup, oblivious, merely repeated his unheard response.
"Yeah?"

"I—uh," Jack shook his head; what came over him anyways? "Come look outside!"

The teen padded over to the window and raised a brow. "Wow. So—you did all this?" he asked, gesturing to the landscape.

Jack chuckled. "Nah, gold's not really my color. That's more of Sandy's thing." He grinned, attempting to tear his eyes away from how auric eruptions from outside complemented questioning viridian right next to him.

Hiccup, befuddled by the statement, cocked his head to the side. "Gold? What gold?" Turning back to the skies, searching carefully, he came to the previous conclusion. "I—don't see anything gold. There's a lot of white, though. Which, I'm guessing, is 'more of your thing.'"

And it was true; for the babysitter, his eyes saw nothing but the purity of now, blanketing over the earth, as though attempting to stifle the noisy present and instill reprieve upon the world during its sleeping hours. It was a quiet display, grand only in its appearance of ubiquity, one that spoke of a mourning serenity, a revered loneliness. And for Jack, it was a quiet revelation.

"You—don't believe in the Sandman?" _'But you believe in me?_'

Hiccup shrugged. "Well, I kind of have to, don't I?" He gave that crooked smile again. "I mean—since you exist, it's only logical to suppose that everyone else that Jamie told me about is real too."

Jack snickered. "And what part of believing in the Guardians is _logical_, Viking-boy?"

Hiccup shot him a sarcastic look. "The kind that would rather prove Jack Frost's existence before 'jumping to conclusions and calling the cops.'" He cringed and sent Jack a sour look. "Even if said Winter Sprite did creep around while I was showering."

He hoped Hiccup didn't see him blush. "Hey, I'm telling you, it was that evil cat of yours that trapped me there." Jack frowned, even as Hiccup muffled a laugh. "And, if you believe in the Sandman—then

why don't you see his Dreamsand?"

Looking to the wintry scene before him and not detecting a single trace of this golden sand, Hiccup bit his lip and tried to think. "Wellâ€¦I guessâ€¦maybe it was because I didn't really grow up with the legend of the Sandman. I meanâ€¦I guess I can sorta see you since you've been a part of my childhood back at Berk."

Jack's frown deepened as his heart gave an unsteady lurch. "What do you mean by 'sorta'?"

"Iâ€¦" Hiccup sighed, a small surrender. "I can't really see you. I know you're thereâ€¦I can hear you pretty well sometimes butâ€¦" His hands made small gestures of frustration and Jack felt his heart sink; the Spirit wished he could take his previous thought back. "It's like looking at a shadow. Anâ€¦apparently very _solid_ shadow. I can see a human figure, but sometimes you blur around the edges and in the dark, it's impossible to tell where you are." Hiccup leaned against the cool plane of glass, allowing it to relieve the tension. "And when you talkâ€¦it's not always clear. It's like the wind blowing and static at the same time to make this interference. I can barely tell what your voice sounds likeâ€¦I didn't want to tell Jamie and Sophie yet because I knew Jamie wouldn't be able to sleep at all and would toss and turn all night trying to figure outâ€¦what went wrong."

Jack could only let out a small "Oh," in response.

The atmosphere drained the emotion out of the two, growing heavy in desolation and disappointment for one and guilt and aggravation for the other. It oppressed the air and whatever hopeful prospects that were previously born as well.

Hiccup smiled wearily, attempting to console the disheartened spirit. "Wellâ€¦we at least got a lot of progress done. We just met today, right?" Hiccup paused, and then worriedly asked, "We _did_ just meet today, right?"

Jack laughed, not as hollowly as he would have originally thought. "Yeah, we did, I promise." Snidely, he added, "I don't make it a habit to go around stalking lanky little fishbones."

The other boy huffed, secretly glad to lighten the mood. "Hey, don't be fooled. I doubt you can take this much raw Vikingness!" And at the exaggerated display of nonexistent 'raw Vikingness' Jack nearly doubled over in laughter before Hiccup hurriedly shushed him; Jamie and Sophie were still asleep after all.

Smiling apologetically, Jack whispered, "You sure about that _Hiccup_?"

Hiccup mocked a thoughtful look. "Wellâ€¦I don't know Jack. I guess that's really up to you." He shook his head, his lips fighting to remain unaffected by his amusement. "You've made children believe in you once, Jack. I'm sure getting me to do the same should prove to be quite the challenge."

Jack cocked a brow. "_Is_ that a challenge?"

Hiccup smirked "Definitely."

"All right," with a cocky grin, Jack took Hiccup's hand and clasped them together in a firm handshake. "You're on."

* * *

><p>Good luck with that, Jack.<p>

Well, let's see where this is headedâ€¦

(And dear God, I apologize to everyone for this.)

7. Guidance and Guardians

Though it has been said and done, I'd like to thank everyone for reading this story and giving me continual support and encouragement. I'd also especially like to thank Just Call Me Endy for helping me with planning and the characterizations (especially with North). You are all wonderful and I hope this suffices. I just hope that I don't let anyone downâ€¦

And OH MY DEAR LORD OVER 100 REVIEWS. DANG. â€"ahem- sorry, but Iâ€¦well, who would've thunk. (I love all of you. Really, I do.)

****Disclaimer: ****I own nothing but a laptop and certain plot elements.

* * *

><p>It had been maybe twenty minutes after Jack's disheartening discovery did Hiccup finally settle into a fitful sleep on the living room couch, cuddled comfortably beneath an extra blanket found in the hall closet. The soft sighs that escaped parted lips echoed in Jack's silent world; the steady rise and fall of his chest and the deceleration of his heart's tempo bore evidence of the first inklings of sleep spindles consuming his conscious. Night's long hours had overcome the younger teen, leaving Jack to quell his own pestering contemplations in solitude. The events not long past flickered through the Guardian's stream of thought while the stillness of the house unnerved him to retreat back to reflecting on those scenes and dialogues.<p>

It had been a while since Pitch Black had slunk off to abysses unknown, but that still didn't mean that slithering shadows and suffocating voids of darkness were any less disturbing, even if the moon did offer some travesty of solace with its borrowed light.

Jack sighed. From the windowsill, he glared at the pale body that hung as though dead, suspended in the winter heavens. Some may call it juvenile, but when it all came down to it, the Man in the Moon just pervaded this aura of knowing and historically possessed a derisive knack for shutting Jack out to his answers.

"C'mon, Man in the Moon," Jack pleaded. "For once, can't you just _tell_ me what's going on?"

Hiccup shifted in his sleep, groaning something in a tongue that Jack didn't understand. Blue eyes settled on the small figure, demeanor

softening at the sight of Hiccup drowning adorably in the blanket as the younger teen curled up for warmth.

(Jack guessed it was his own fault for getting carried away for a second there; frost had started to flourish on the Bennetts' rug.)

Deciding that interrogating a quiet piece of rock in the sky was of no use (it hadn't been for three-hundred years, so why would it work now?), Jack settled again for spacing out by the window. From the corner of his eye, he caught sight of a few rivulets of sand circling in the night sky, lulling the children of Burgess to the realms of slumber.

Jack grinned; well if Moony refused his assistance, then he'll just look to someone else for a few tips on getting one particularly stubborn little Viking to truly believe in him. Casting one last glance at Hiccup and deeming the boy too far gone to even notice a little January chill from an open window, Jack flew into the open skies, hoping to catch Sandy before he retired for the night.

And as the Ice Spirit departed, Hiccup mumbled incoherently once more as thin trickles of gold wound through his subliminal thoughts, weaving through webs of recollections and mundane data acquired throughout his short lifetime to infiltrate through a threshold in his mind long safeguarded by adolescence and reality. There was a small instant of illumination, the breath of life sweeping through immortal visions, and for the first time in years, Hamish "Hiccup" Haddock III smiled in his sleep.

He dreamed of dragons.

.

It had been a while since he last saw the other Guardians; Jack allowed the winds to carry him as far as ascension was possible to reach the zenith of the sky where (hopefully) Sandy had barely begun his descent after his nightly rounds. Rocketing through wisps of clouds and tearing through the overpowering stagnancy with a liberating yell, Jack grinned as he caught sight of one petite, golden-clad man atop a mass of Dreamsand.

With the first and final warning cry of "SANDY!", the Guardian of Dreams had only a small moment to prepare himself for the incoming impact before Jack Frost launched at him with frightening zeal.

Luckily, the golden grains provided ample cushioning to the otherwise painful collision. Sandy raised a brow as the sand settled and came to face a sheepish Jack that could barely contain his excitement. Nevertheless, the Sandman greeted his fellow Guardian with amiable silence.

"Hey Sandy, sorry 'bout that, how've you been, hey I know it's short notice, but you mind helping me out with something?" the Winter Guardian trilled, still smiling, and out of breath.

The Guardian of Dreams blinked. Well now—this was unusual, even for Jack. Still, the mute man happily nodded his head, glad to be of help for his friend—especially since Jack seemed ready to explode once

again.

"Really? Thanks Sandy!" Jack's grin faltered before the lightest shades of pink dusted his cheeks. How on earth was he supposed to explain this situation again? That he needed assistance in making one fifteen year old boy to be able to see him? A fifteen year-old boy that he only met today and is now the object of the Winter Guardian's focus just because he somewhat found him to be very interesting? Jack internally shrugged. _'Might as well start with the basics.'_ "I need help getting someone to believe in me."

Sandy frowned and gave Jack a strange look; the other Guardian knew what that meant. If he didn't, then the floating Dreamsand molding to a large X above him definitely provided the right imagery.

Jack groaned. "No, not like that; I know that we aren't supposed to go around revealing ourselves to kids, but this time it's different! I promise, it's not what you think at all! This one, heâ€|heâ€|" There was a diminuendo in his voice, a silent plea. "He _believes_ in me...he just can't _see_ me."

Wide eyed, the smaller man looked on in shock as the normally spirited Guardian deflated. Expression jumping from bewilderment to sympathy, Sandy laid a hand on Jack's arm in reassurance.

"Thanks Sandyâ€|so, will you help me?" At the quick and sincere nod, Jack smiled. "So, uhâ€|I guess I have to explain what I meant by that, don't I?"

Nodding again, the Guardian of Dreams plopped down on the floating, golden heap; knowing Jack, taking a seat is called forâ€"though he was never sure why, Jack tended to get into a lot of trouble. It was probably due to his nature.

"Okayâ€|wellâ€|let's startâ€|" He took a breath. "Jamie has aâ€"a friend." (Yeah, let's go with that.) "Recently moved here and all. Well, I was visiting Burgess to give them all a snow day right before school startsâ€"hey, yes. That was necessary. Don'tâ€"don't give me that look! It's my job andâ€"whatever, geezâ€|are all you old Guardians so uptight with rules and regulations? Okay, that look you're giving me is way too much like to the look the Easter Kangaroo gave me after that little joke I played on him last time we all met up."

Sandy sighed. He knew this boy was a ball of trouble.

Jack huffed. He forgot how anal the others got when it came to their code of ethics. He was the Guardian of Fun; weren't there exceptions to these things? "Okayâ€|long-story-short: the guy's from this place called Berk, somewhere in Europe where they still uphold a lot of their old 'Viking' culture." Jack caught the puzzled look from the silent man and continued. "Weird? Totally, but that's not the point! It turns out he's been hearing stories about me since he was just a kid." And Jack laughed, thrilled and giddy at the enlightenment. "Apparently, I'm an old legend thereâ€|someone he used toâ€"and still believes in." A ghost of affection lingered in his smile, a light fondness entangling with enthusiasm.

The older Guardian lit up at that; Sandy knew it was difficult for Jack and even after years of isolation, the immortal teen just wanted

people to see him. But this raised an interesting question indeed—and a very worrying prospect. But the latter thought was pushed aside for now. Sandy returned Jack's eager beam with one of a smaller scale.

"Yeah—too good to be true, huh?" He looked to the open night sky, feeling entrapped in solitude once more from the forlorn sensation of existing as a living pariah, of quiet agony falling on deaf ears. He shook his head from those thoughts; it was different now. Things were different. He was different. And he would have Hiccup see him. He turned back to his friend and tried to ignore the worried look on Sandy's face. "But the weird thing is that he can't see me." Frowning, Jack counted off one facet by finger. "He can definitely feel me, he can hear me pretty okay too, and—" Scratching his head, Jack looked up to the First Guardian. "He can sorta see me too. Just—sorta." He frowned. "He said I was like a shadow or some creepy thing that you'd normally think of as Pitch, or something like that."

Sandy appeared slightly taking aback, confusion definitely evident on his face. A small parody of a wailing ghost materialized from Dreamsand to illustrate.

Jack snickered. "I dunno, but that's what I probably look like to him." Softly, he added, "Heh, poor kid. No wonder he got so freaked out while he was taking a shower."

The disturbed look that Sandy sent him was priceless.

Jack groaned once again. "Oh for the love of—" it was his stupid cat's fault okay?" After giving a clear look of "I really don't believe that," Jack settled on changing the subject. "But yeah, that's what happened. Any idea why or do you have any suggestions on how to fix it?"

Now it was Sandy's turn to ignore the previous non sequitur statement in favor of piecing together this strange puzzle the Ice Spirit had presented to him. Visibly pondering, the Guardian of Dreams furrowed his brow. The Sandman, though he had encountered a vast array of peculiar incidents associated with Believers in his duty as the Harbinger of Dreams to children, had never encountered a situation such as this before (or at least he doesn't remember such an instance). So, sadly, Sandy raised a finger and shook his head.

For Jack, there was no concealing the disappointment that flooded his features. "Oh—well, thanks for listening to me anyways Sand—" The older Guardian paused him with a hand over Jack's running mouth, feigning irritation.

The Sandman raised a second finger and nodded.

Jack was torn between joy and curiosity. "Who do you think can help me with this?"

At the inquiry, Sandy grabbed hold of Jack's sleeve and gave him an mischievous grin before a tidal wave of golden sand engulfed them and along with it, swallowed Jack's horrified yelp. The Dreamsand shot them straight through the sky, demolishing all prospects for a peaceful night (or of what remained of it) as the two traversed Northward.

Nicholas St. North would like to say that it was a _pleasant_ surprise to see his two fellow Guardians and friends drop (crash) by. He'd also like to say that while he loved that particular window, it would have been no bother at all to replace. He would like to, but that didn't stop him from smiling far too widely in front of his _friends_ to restrain what was most likely aggravation and mild fury fusing together in a miniature explosive set to detonate quite soon if Jack wouldn't _be quiet_.

"Sorry 'bout the mess, but I'll tell you right now that it is _not_ my fault!" Jack jabbed a finger at Sandy's direction, the indicated man clearly appalled at the accusation. "_Someone_ here decided to have his yellow sand eat me whole while it flung us this way and that at mach 50!"

Sandy pinched the bridge of his nose. Instead, he used the Dreamsand above him to demonstrate a summary of what occurred, leading up to their current situation: in the aftermath of a rather crude landing in part of Jack's struggling to attain control over the flight.

North sighed. "Jack, you should not struggle so much when you are passenger. You willâ€" " Another piece of glass shattered in the backdrop; North's eye twitched. "_crash._"

Grimacing, Jack sent the man an apologetic look. "Sorry." Jack turned to the partially demolished sector of the workshop. "Sorry, Phil!" Said Yeti merely sighed before grunting in acknowledgment and resumed sweeping up the debris of ruined glass, brick, and machinery. The unfortunate elves who were nearby the accident site when it occurred were shipped off to the infirmary.

"Now," Clasping his hands together with a more earnest smile, the Guardian of Wonder towered over his two guests, half affably and half menacingly. "To what do I owe theâ€"pleasure of visit?"

Behind the Winter Guardian's back, Sandy jabbed a thumb in Jack's direction.

"Jack!" the man bellowed with a hearty laugh. "How good of you to come." He patted the Frost Spirit's shoulder (a little too roughly) as Jack forced an uneasy chuckle of his own. "So, what seems to be problem, friend?"

"Iâ€|" Jack hesitated. "Well you seeâ€|"

"Oho! Jack Frostâ€|tripping over his words? Hm! Truly a marvel!" The legendary figure of Christmas smile knowingly as he eyed the Winter Guardian. "Ah! Do not tell meâ€|" He snapped his fingers. "You met special someone, eh?"

"What? NO! Not like that!" To Jack's absolute horror, he felt his anatomy betray him as blood rushed to his cheeks; another roar of laughter from North reverberated throughout the spacious factory worsened his condition. "I thought you were supposed to be jolly," Jack grumbled, deeply galled by the reaction. He was pretty sure that Sandy was noiselessly laughing behind him as well.

North shrugged. "You break window, I get _my_ jollies."

"Yeah, yeah"so, Sandy," Jack turned his attention to the amused Guardian of Dreams, "You think North can help me out?"

With a decisive nod from the silent Guardian, Jack sighed and faced the colossal man. He recounted the preceding events once again and explained his predicament in a manner that wouldn't lead North to suspect some kind of ulterior motive, careful not to let too many things slip"especially the fact that Hiccup was physically close to his age. The last thing he wants is a misunderstanding between him and North"especially after that mortifyingly unnecessary comment. So what if he found that little fishbone cute?

Half of Jack wanted to deny the fact that he thought about that; the other half wholeheartedly agreed.

Ruminating over the information that the Winter Guardian had just provided, the Guardian of Wonder stroked his beard in contemplation. "That is definitely strange, Jack." His gaze locked with Jack's, a curious emotion hidden within the flecks of grey and blue, searching and scrutinizing. "And you are sure he knew of you before?"

Jack frowned. "Yeah, he talked about _Jǫ́kul Frosti _before he even knew I was there."

A bolt out of the blue, that statement heralded crucial epiphany. "Idea!" North beamed at his friends. "That must be problem!"

Both Jack and Sandy sent one another dubious looks before their questioning faces looked to North for a reasonable explanation.

Chuckling deeply, North explicated, "It is simple, my friend: this boy must have you confused with other Jack Frost"this Jǫ́kul Frosti of his childhood!" Pleased with himself, the Guardian crossed his arm and looked to his friends for approval of his theory.

Jack opened his mouth to comment, but the sentence died in his throat from the surge of confusion that flooded him mind from that moment. To his right, Sandy mulled the possibility over in his head before slowly nodding in comprehension.

North chortled. "See? Sandy gets idea!"

Jack shook his head, an exasperated chuckle tumbling from his mouth. "Sorry North, but not all your 'ideas' are very clear"or"you know"sane?"

North tutted. "What I mean, Jack, is that this boy perhaps thinks you as this being in legends that has been passed down from word of mouth for generations. Unlike others, your tale is older than your life. When this boy thinks of Jack Frost, he thinks _Jǫ́kul Frosti_, even if two of you are two different people."

The Winter Guardian sank deeper to perplexity. "But"I _am _Jǫ́kul Frosti"aren't I? I mean, it's just another language."

Clasping his large hand on the teen's shoulder, the rotund man

persisted in his guidance to the disconcerted Guardian. "Yes, but meaning is different! Legends are different, your pasts are different, you are different!" Maneuvering Jack so he stood before him, the Guardian of Wonder had this to offer in enlightenment: "You must understand, friend, your name is much older than your existence. Old Man Winter was mere fairytale—but you, Jack Frost, Guardian of Fun—you are what stands before us today! You exist!"

"I exist," Jack echoed as his thoughts hollowly reverberated in reminiscent response, 'I'm here.'

"Yes!" North boomed animatedly, "And if you want this boy to see you, you must prove yourself different from other entity he mistakes you with! You must break away from old idea the boy has of you so he may see you for who you truly are."

Allowing it all to sink in, Jack numbly asked, "So, you really think something that crazy's going to work?"

North shrugged. "Eh, only really crazy ideas are worth doing."

"Good point," Jack agreed in reluctance. Contemplating this new perspective, Jack mulled over the next course of action. "So, how do I get him tell me apart from Old Man Winter?"

"That—" North faltered before resuming his pondering-position. "If...I have any advice to give you, it is this: you must let him get to know you. With little Jamie, it was most likely much easier since he was, what you call a 'blank slate.' With this boy, you might need him to know you on more...personal level."

Jack fought hard not to choke and/or gape like a fish. "â|huh?"

North smiled. "Personal! Get to know him, talk to him, and in turn, have him know you! It is relationship building, one that must be done carefully—lest you be doomed to be cast in shadow of old Jǫ́kull Frosti in this boy's eyes—forever!" the Guardian emphasized ominously. Jack blinked, feeling a knot of uncertainty tighten in his stomach; in a split-second, North continued his jovial demeanor. "In short, let him have you as friend before he has you as Guardian!" Jack didn't like where this was going. "Jack, why do you make unpleasant and red face?"

Jack didn't like where this was going at all. "Oh—no reason."

'Except for the fact that you're basically telling me, 'Woo the little fishbone or he'll never truly see you.'

* * *

><p>In Sandy's defense, he just wanted to get there faster. That's why he conjured the Dreamsand for a quick lift. And—I think that's the reason why a lot of kids don't see Jack Frost, even though his legend is pretty popular. At least in reference. And...I hope I got implying North's accent more or less correct...it's a lot harder to get than I thought...<p>

But, again: good luck Jack.

(And again, sorry.)

8. Courting and Conundrums

Well it's me againâ€”me and a new chapter. I know I keep saying the same thing over and over again, but I am grateful for all you readers out there. I want to thank everyone who has offered me their help and advice and if you all ever just want to talk about the story or anything else, sending me a PM or even a review will be good. I made it a point to thank and respond to each and every message I receive. I want to thank Just Call me Endy again for really helping me out as well as AncestorsEcho for looking over this chapter.

Also, Happy Spring Break for all you lucky ducks out there. Meanwhile, I am buried under home(break)work.

And yes...that little fail I used as a cover was drawn by me.

****Disclaimer: ****I own nothing but a laptop and certain plot elements.

* * *

><p>The boy of ice swiveled past pinking clouds on the wing as he rode the currents of winter winds in his traverse homebound. The sunbeams peeked over the lazy morning, sunrise slow and omnipotent; in the earliest hours of dawn, silence reigned heavily while a sluggish crescendo threatened to burst through the horizon. The Spirit of Winter carried on, body light as though feathered hope conceded his fate, contrasting starkly with his muted journey; thoughts anchored the Guardian with trepid worries and uneasy hesitancy.<p>

Jack had departed a while ago from North's abode, bearing with him the surprising revelation in regards to the green-eyed boy that caught the Winter Guardian's interest and a fragment of a plot in his head to commence the procedures that must follow. All the while, the same thoughts resurfaced over and over again in dizzying cycles that broke off any real effort in planning. These troubling ideas blared in vexing and perturbing manners that were difficult for even the typically lighthearted Guardian to shrug off.

It was even more uncertain as to why he was feeling this way.

Sure it was a bit strange and definitely staggering to find North's assumption to make sense in all this, but it was also very possible and it was better than nothingâ€”but the mere thought that all Jack had to do was make the younger teen believe in him as a person rather than just as a fairytale he had heard long agoâ€”

That was a bit of a paradox, wasn't it?

They were fairytales, the stuff of legends, and as much as Jack hated to admit it, they weren't actually people. They were Guardiansâ€”protectors of children, the same children that would inherit the earth one day. Their duties were far greater than what most normal people held. It was pertinent that children do not

forget their innocence, that they keep their hopes, and dreams, see the wonder that the world possesses underneath all the rot and decay of morality—and have fun every once in a while. Yes, children forget as they grow older, but it is still worth it—to be seen with awe and knowing that they made a significant impact on their lives just by presence alone. It was wonderful, beautiful—and lonely at the same time. It was fleeting, this joy, but in a way, timeless because the children would grow to have their own children, nurturing them with love and care, under the protection of bedtime stories and instilling the beliefs that made youth worth remembering. And in that way, the Guardians live on.

But—

With this boy, Jack was supposed to erase this old image of Jǫrkul Frosti, of Old Man Winter, and replace it with himself, as the _true_ Jack Frost. He was to be an embodiment of Ice and Winter no more, but a tangible being, someone who longs to be seen, who longs to be believed in, who longs to see those vibrant viridian eyes light up with amazement and understanding for the Spirit of Winter before him, the same Spirit that was slowly and surely fading—

Jack stopped that thought right there, wide-eyed in shock, trepidation, mortification, and wonder at the unnamed emotion that sprung forth out of nowhere.

Having physically halted as well, the Guardian of Fun let out a shaky laugh that no one save the winds that carried him heard and eased himself towards comforting denial. The trailing pondering of '_What the hell was that?_' died off before the troubling thought reached fruition as Jack flew off again at a moderate pace.

Despite this, the forethought remained: He had to get that boy to see him. A part of him had sufficiently assured North, Sandy, and even himself that gaining a Believer was this important to him due to the opportunity's scarcity—yet part of Jack knew and feared that maybe there was some sort of ulterior motive of his behind all this: one that he was (currently) ignoring in favor of good intentions.

'_Well, you know what they say about Hell and good intentions—'_ a tiny voice in his head quipped. Jack made a point to deny that as well. Besides, that wasn't reason enough to deter him from getting the little Viking to see Jack as his awesome self. Seeing nothing but a shadow of the great Jack Frost, Guardian of Fun was a travesty of a tragedy!

Jack smiled, feeling a bit of normalcy (well, whatever there was to begin with) settle into the new day. With that thought goading him towards his goal, Jack sped in hasty excitement towards the sleeping town of Burgess, happily denying the existence of the strange fluttery feeling in the core of his gut at the thought of seeing the freckled little hiccup with red hair in certain hues and eyes like eternal summers.

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North chuckled as he set his frothy drink down on the table, mindful of any elves that planned to sneak a treat or two from the platter between him and Sandy. The shorter man looked to his larger friend

with confusion.

North detected the distinct sound of a bell rattling suspiciously close to the table as he reached forward to take another cookie. Nevertheless, he vowed to let the curious things learn their lesson in time, for now focusing on his guest and their shared dilemma of a certain brash Guardian.

"Is strange, is it not?" North gestured to the air. "That Jack's true problem might be cause of old JÄñkul." The melted cream swirled in the hot chocolate and North scrutinized the drink from afar as though deciphering a prophecy in a crystal ball. He always did like milk better, though it got tiring, especially right after the holidays. "If I am correct, it will be hard work for our young friend."

Sandy nodded, sympathetic of the youngest Guardian.

"Butâ€¦if he is successful, little boy can help spread his legend. Many eager young children to hear his own tale, picture it Sandy!" On that optimistic note, North rumbled a jolly chuckle. "And good friend Jack will be believedâ€"with time." North sighed, decisively unwelcoming of the sobering thought. "Yes, with time." Looking back at his ever-quiet friend, North shared with him a solemn smile. "Is difficult to erase past, eh?"

Sandy agreed; while the two of them had existed for far longer than Jack, their names were in accordance with their creationsâ€”just as their fables. For Jack, it seemed as though an outline was created for him too soonâ€”one that he didn't quite fit. The end result of the imperfect deviance to the design was centuries of loneliness. It was no secret that Jack had wanted nothing more than to be seen again after he became a Guardian, to experience what the other Guardians felt from knowing that children around the world adored him and appreciated him for what he did. Of course, such feats were never simple.

Jamie had been a flukeâ€”an accident that crossed certain boundaries. Guardians were never supposed to reveal themselves before a child. Nevertheless, the moment it was done, there was no reversing it: it was out of their jurisdiction. Otherwise, the others would have agreed that this case was permissible since it had been Jack's first. Believerâ€”the matter of the other children knowing, however, now seemed a small blessing ever since some light had been shed on this mystery as to how Jack Frost could not be seen by other children. They all could help Jack to be recognizedâ€”a different legend from his ancient counterpart.

Both Guardians supposed it was thanks to the little boy that Jack spoke of that they now had at least an idea as to why Jack couldn't be seen. Still, that may only solve part of the problem. As the two contemplated for a short moment, neither registered the tiny fingers inching towards the treats, groping for the large platter and dragging the tablecloth towards the edge.

Frowning, the First Guardian looked to his own cupâ€”this one of milk. He saw nothing but ripples of white, monochrome and opaque. The Dreamsand above him molded to form a clock, its golden hands ticking forebodingly.

There was a flicker of worry that glimmered in North's eyes; then

again, this could have been a trick in the light, a taunting delusion, as North laughed heartily without a hint of care. "Ah, do not worry so much for our friend. Jack has plenty of time before Jamie and little friend of Jamie's"

A loud crash severed the conversation and both Guardians swiftly turned to a sheepish elf in the midst of cracked china and crushed cookies. The hot chocolate ran in staining rivers around the culprit. North sighed and rubbed his temples while the little creature looked on with careless eyes and a worried smile. With an exasperated wave of his hand, North figured there was really nothing else to do at this point. "Go" just go." And with that, the elf scurried off, cookie crammed in his mouth while Sandy looked on with amusement.

Sinking back into his favorite chair, North heartlessly called forth his most devoted (and overworked) employee. "PHIIIL!"

From a distance, said yeti could only muffle his groan.

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The first thing that Hiccup registered after being forcefully ripped from his dreams was the bemused look on Jamie's face as the nine-year-old deliberately poked a rather sensitive area in his rib. He mumbled disagreeably. It was too early to even roll away before a sizeable bruise formed. So Hiccup silently suffered through the treatment, only groaning a few times when some particularly hard jabs sent dull throbs of pain coursing through his system. He could hear Jamie say something, but it was again too early to even attempt to translate the sentence in his head.

Ah"if ignorance is bliss, denial must be some strange form of heaven"

Jamie looked to his sister and frowned. "He's not waking up."

Sophie gasped, horror etching on her face.

Jamie shook his head. "Nah, he's breathing, see?" he pointed to the small and steady movements. Jamie poked Hiccup on the cheek, causing the teen's face to scrunch up and turn away. "He moves and makes sounds too."

The younger Bennett scurried off after staring at her seemingly inert babysitter. Jamie raised a brow as he listened to tiny, hurried footsteps thump the upstairs floorboards. Shrugging, Jamie turned back to Hiccup, weighing his options: if he sat on Hiccup, it would definitely wake him up. But by doing so, he'd run the chance of hurting his rather frail sitter. That and it would make him seem too much like a little kid. The bad kind, that is. When his ears picked up the distinct pitter-patter of his sister, he turned to see her holding a worn children's book by a half-torn page. She held out the book expectantly, eyes peeking curiously between the crumpled pages and Hiccup.

Taking the book and flipping it to the front to take a look at the cover, Jamie exploded into laughter at the sight of the title alone.

Hiccup, who had been enjoying the small reprieve, could only guess that whatever caused the sudden mirth had something to do with him—or more specifically, it was at his expense. Taking a deep breath and kissing sweet black oblivion goodbye, Hiccup blinked the sleep out of his eyes before languidly sitting up. Unsurprisingly, he found Jamie snickering and Sophie grinning; unexpectedly, he then found Mrs. Bennett entering the living room from the kitchen. Still too sluggish to be panicked, he merely stared blandly at the woman as she approached him, an apologetic smile on her face.

"Oh Hiccup, thanks so much for taking care of Jamie and Sophie the whole night."

Hiccup dumbly nodded. That's right—he stayed the whole night, and during that night, he had the craziest dream that—

Suddenly alert, Hiccup sat up straight as obscure visions clouded his mind; it was difficult to differentiate between wraith and reality now. He looked to Jamie and Sophie for some sort of sign, some sort of indication that what happened that night just wasn't some lucid illusion fabricated from some downsized episode of temperature-induced hysteria (because it certainly wasn't _that_ cold—unless he caught a sort of Arctic hysteria as well). Eyes silently pleading, each sibling rewarded him with a small smile that visibly calmed Hiccup and made his mind race at the same time.

Mrs. Bennett frowned in worry. "Is everything okay, Hiccup? I hope it wasn't too much trouble for you."

Hiccup shook his head. "No, it wasn't a problem ma'am. Jamie and Sophie behaved very well." Getting up to pick up after himself, the teen made sure to make it seem like he wasn't in too much of a hurry to run home and clear his thoughts. "I hope you had no trouble returning home. I'm happy you made it back safely."

The woman smiled; such a polite boy Mr. Haddock had. "That's a relief to hear, and thanks for your concern. Strangely, the blizzard cleared up during the night while you all were sleeping." She shot a questioning look to her children to confirm the fact that they were indeed asleep at the appropriate hour. At the unreserved nod from Jamie, she continued. "Your father arrived not too long ago as well."

At the mention of his dad, Hiccup didn't know whether to feel relieved or anxious. It was always mixed feelings with the senior Haddock, even though their relationship had definitely improved over the years. Still, his father's occupancy in their house probably meant that he'd have to escape elsewhere to think things through. "That's great! If it's all right with you, I'll go see him right now." It would still be better to check up on him, not that the great Stoick the Vast needed it of course—except for when it came to dinner.

With Mrs. Bennett's affirmation, Hiccup bid the Bennett siblings a goodbye and supplied the promise of playing with them later on; Jamie caught the hint as the boy eagerly nodded and wordlessly directed Hiccup's attention towards a section of the living room. Calling to Toothless, the Norwegian Forest trotted down from the stairs to his side with a meow and a stretch before both Haddocks headed off.

Hiccup passed an open window by Jamie's indication, its pane decorated with frost ferns. He idly wondered if that was really due to the Winter Spirit that visited them last night or from his own carelessness.

The Bennetts sent their farewells to Hiccup one last time before the lanky boy stepped out the door with the loyal feline at his heels. Mrs. Bennett smiled as the door clicked shut. Such a nice boy to get along with her children and to be looking after them for free as well! It was wonderful to know that good people still existed. She set off towards the kitchen to comfort Abby and to inform her that Toothless had finally departed. Catching sight of the tattered book on the floor, Mrs. Bennett could only sigh and turn to her daughter.

"Oh Sophieâ€¦and _Sleeping Beauty_ was one of your favorites too..."*

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It wasn't much later that Jack had coincidentally spotted Hiccup as the boy trudged through the snow.

In the middle of town.

Shaking his head, Jack plunged down to the teen clad only in light winter wear, almost in mockery of Jack's amazing abilities. As he neared the boy, Jack was pleased to note the distinct lack of Toothless's presence. However, he did frown at the sight of Hiccup nearly losing his balance every few yards. Jack sighed and leaned against his staff, half amused by the clumsy movements and half something else that made him smile as the teen awkwardly waddled through the snow-blanketed earth.

Deciding to be merciful, Jack _supposed_ he could help Hiccup againâ€¦that is, if the little fishbone would move out of the way. Smirking at an idea and with a breath of frost later, the Guardian of Fun held a perfectly formed sphere of frost and slush. Jack also supposed that the best way to grab the teen's attention was to lob an icy projectile at him.

It worked of course.

Hiccup, from the surprise attack, yelped as he lost his balance and once more face-planted into the snow. He grumbled somethingâ€¦"probably not in English, Jack concludedâ€¦"before Hiccup tentatively raised his head and shook the snow off of his sweater. Twisting around to get a better look at his surroundings and to identify the culprit, he merely glared at the sight (or lack thereof) of the Frost Spirit.

"Of course it's you," the teen drawled, clearly unamused.

There was less interference with his voice today, Hiccup surmised as jovial laughter rang in the air. Dusting himself off, he faced the figure whose semblance heavily juxtaposed with his wintry creation. Jack seemed to make an apologetic gesture, made especially evident by the flurry of snow that circled the air as a powerful blast of wind cleared a solid path ahead of him.

Then again, Hiccup could be wrong. "Aw, missed me?" Hiccup couldn't pride himself in being great at deciphering body language.

"Like frostbite." Hiccup smirked at the distinct sound of an irritated huff.

"And where are you headed to this fine winter morning, sunshine?" Because honestly, why would someone be out here near the center of the town in the aftermath of a blizzard? People would normally stay within their own property or go to a park to enjoy such nice weather.

Hiccup, though grateful for the passageway, was still annoyed by the earlier actions of the Frost Spirit and decided against vocalizing his thanks. "Dad wanted me to head over to school." It was something that was both incredulous for the teen, yet proved useful in getting lost in his own thoughts...or getting lost in general. But that didn't stop Hiccup from dramatizing the scene in a heavily satirized Norwegian***** accent. "_Ya better head off naow. Ya wouldn't want yor mind to shrivel up like the rest of yew. Whot? It's jest a beet of snoe. Blizzard? Hah! We're from Berk. Yev seen werse." _Hiccup was pleased to hear Jack laugh earnestly. The accent had taken a while to get it just right. Unfortunately, neither his father, nor Gobber were particularly pleased by his rendition.

Collecting himself, Jack smirked. "Hate to break it to ya, but school's officially cancelled for at least three more daysâ€"courtesy of moi," he boasted.

Hiccup rolled his eyes. "Yeah, it was apparently on the radio all morning. I was sure to thank that nice old lady for the info."

Jack raised a brow. "What was she doing outside?"

"Oh, no she wasn't out here." Hiccup paused to try and word the situation as best he could. "She actually opened her window and yelled it at me from across the street and called me a moron after I told her why I was walking around."

It was apparently quite effortless to amuse the Guardian. "Okay then," Jack chortled. He subdued his hilarity towards the situation to pursue another question as Hiccup still trekked onward and away from the route to his neighborhood. "So whyâ€|?"

Hiccup shrugged. "Better than sitting around at home."

"Ah." That was as good as any answer he'd get out from the boy at this point. It then occurred to Jack... "Well, hey, if you're looking to waste timeâ€|" Best not to beat around the bush; and seriously, what nice timing? He needed an excuse just now to start courting the little fishbone. "Wanna hang out?"

It took perhaps five seconds for Jack's brain to register that wayward thought. '_Court?!'_ his mind blurted in horror. Thankfully, it remained as just a very loud thought.

The younger of the pair paused in his tracks and sent the Frost Spirit a look displaying both incredulity and slight suspicion. "Really? Errâ€|not that the idea isn't tempting, butâ€|" Hiccup

awkwardly shifted about. "Don't you have stuff to do?"

Jack blinked. "Stuff?"

"Yeah, you know. Like, painting the leaves brown, nipping noses, dropping feathers to make snow, I dunno." Hiccup steadied himself as he continued walking along the cleared sidewalk. He flinched as he almost lost footing. It seemed as though the rest of the pavement was iced over as well.

Jack trailed behind him, interest piqued. "What?"
'_Feathers?_'

"Nevermind." Hiccup chuckled at the memory of the myth's context.

Humming, Jack thought over the final point mentioned. "Well, that one's newâ€|never heard of that last little tale before."

The teen shrugged. "Ehâ€|you're actually a popular guy around the world. Or at least Europe. If I'm right, that was a German version of you."

Jack grinned. "Really?"

"Yeah. In that one, you're a woman." There was no hiding Hiccup's delight at Jack's response.

"Augh really?" he gratingly bemoaned. '_Figures something like that would existâ€|Rule 63 and all..._'

"Hah, yeah. It's actually really weirdâ€|" Hiccup thoughts began to wander again as he observed the repercussion of Jack's doing. The morning rays revealed the extent of the damage, and though it was mostly snow which equated to a lot of shoveling to get the roads cleared, it was still quite a sight to behold. It was the brevity of Winter's power, he guessed. It was the breadth of magic that truly existed. "I wonder what else they got wrong about you." Quite the sight indeed...especially if the person that caused its entirety happened to be floating right behind you.

Jack smiled; he knew an opening when he saw one. "Wanna find out?"

"Huh?" Hiccup inwardly groaned. He really ought to control his thoughts now that they had the tendency to just slip out.

The Guardian of Winter circled the boy, stance and tone casual if not just a little bit heavy with a hint of self-assurance in subtle undertones. "Well, hey, I'm just sayin'. It's not every day that a Guardian just falls right out of the skyâ€"

"And pelts you with snowballs?" Hiccup supplied with a sickly sweet smile.

"Snow_ball_," Jack corrected, staff pointed at Hiccup for emphasis. "And you're missing the point! C'mon, I know you're curious."

"Hmâ€|wellâ€"you got me there. I am," the brunet conceded. And it was

true and for some reason, he didn't like admitting that.

Jack grinned, a little happy that Hiccup couldn't see how relieved he was. "That's great! And I'm a bit curious too." Jack was, right now, really glad Hiccup couldn't see the faint tint of red on his face as well.

Hiccup paused mid-step. "About?"

Jack, again, scoffed. "You. Duh."

He fell back into step. "There's really not much to say," the younger teen replied simply.

The Guardian frowned at the dismissive answer. "Really? The first guy to see me as a shadowâ€"in fact, probably the first person to ever see another Guardian as a shadowâ€"and you're telling me that there's 'not much to say'?" Jack kept pace with the other teen and leaned forward to catch a glimpse of any telltale sign of the boy's discomfort. _'What's wrong?'_

"Don't look at me; I have no idea about that either." Jack didn't know whether to interpret that answer as literal or figurative. Judging by the way Hiccup veered off to the side to achieve a bit of space between them, he probably meant it as a little bit of both.

Jack abated the gap that separated them, nearly bumping shoulders with the younger teen in the process. "Well, neither do I." _'At least, not completely,' _he mentally added. But Hiccup didn't need to know that now and Jack still needed to prove the theory's veracity. "So, we might as well, right?"

"Might as well what?" Hiccup frowned; Frosty here's getting just a little too close for comfortâ€¦

"Get to know each other!" Jack announced, not as oblivious to the connotation it could be taken for as he would have liked.

Hiccup shot him a longsuffering look. "What, do we play Twenty Questions or something?" Seriously, some people are just too forward.

Jack snickered. "Heh, if you want to be boring about it."

The fifteen-year-old rolled his eyes and recited his answer dramatically once more: "Then what do you suggest, Almighty Deity of Winter?"

"Hush," Jack chided, though the title did have a nice ring to itâ€but he was unfortunately supposed to show Hiccup who he really is. "And I'm not." Jack guessed it was better to distinguish himself from JÃkul now than later.

"Really?" The surprise from Hiccup seemed genuine this time.

"Nope, not at all!" He smirked. "See? You totally wanted to know more about me. I was so right." The gloating would have been much more satisfying if Jack didn't feel so irritatingly reassured now.

Hiccup sighed in mock annoyance. "Whatever. You try having the world turned topsy-turvy at your very feet and be nonchalant about it." Well, it was mostly mock anyways. Still, now that Hiccup pondered more and more of the circumstance, it appealed more favorably than he originally thought. The scarcity of moments like these must be utterly astonishing.

The Frost Sprite grinned. "Aw, I make your world turn 'topsy-turvy', do I?"

"Oh hush you," Hiccup admonished, turning away.

Jack laughed. "See? We get along great." It might've been that strange filtering effect in Jack's voice like the one Hiccup heard last night, but Jack's voice seemed to soften at the declaration.

Hiccup feigned a critical look before smiling. "Yeah, I suppose."

It was a little stupid how that little confirmation made Jack's hopes soar to ridiculous heights. "So, wanna ditch whatever imaginary and intact school your dad's making you attend for a day with the real Jack Frost?" Still, he had to be wary of that drop of hubris, the one little misstep that sent Icarus crashing down.

"Hmph." Hiccup tried not to smile too widely. "Why not?"

Because if he wasn't careful, not even pure white feathers that drifted down to create the softest of snow could save him from the fall.

* * *

><p>I love Phil, that I do.<p>

*= that one picture of Hiccup as Aurora (and Astrid as Prince Philip). Hilariously accurate to some respect.

*= for some reason, Dreamworks thought that it would be a good idea to give Vikings a Scottish accent. So, I'll follow in their lead and just label it Norwegian. I sincerely apologize if anyone reading this is from Norway because I'm following the movie-canon and also I honestly don't know how to do that accent. I'm terrible at that sort of thing. Forgive me.

Poor Jack, Hiccup's a wily one. Courting's serious business.

(Also, symbolism is hard.)

9. Possibilities and Promises

At the moment that most were looking forward to the so-called "first date." Just Call Me Endy and Ancestors you both have my eternal gratitude for helping me with this. To all those that read my story, I want you guys to know that you all play a great deal in my writing. Thanks for all the encouragement and advice. I hope you enjoy...

****Disclaimer: ****I own nothing but a laptop and certain plot elements.

* * *

><p>The snow glittered under the dazzling embrace of sunbeams, thousands of diamonds twinkling in clandestine happiness that enshrouded the still world from the tops of roofs and houses to the iced streets and the slush-laden earth. For once it seemed the planet had paused in its revolution, frozen like winter, initiating the old endings that lay dormant to await new beginnings. It was lonely stagnancy and the impendence of death, snow like ashes to herald the rebirth of possibilities. The crisp and tranquil air provided an ample visage for anticipation and promises masked by serenity and imminence of finality.<p>

All this heavily contrasted with the chattering Guardian beside Hiccup.

Hiccup fought quite hard to keep himself from grinning at the great form of irony before him—the harbinger of such a forlorn and somber time whose duty was to enrich the lives of children with joy and laughter. Hiccup also found irony in how he saw the Guardian right now: the antithesis of his creation, the foreboding shadow that veiled a bubbly persona filled with humor and nonsense. Speaking of nonsense—|

"—oh yeah, and seriously, you kinda have to feel bad for them. I mean, look at Phil!" Hiccup laughed as he noted the exaggerated gestures his companion made in emphasis. "Poor guy works real hard but all the credit goes to the elves. Not that there's anything wrong with 'em, cuz Dingle's pretty all right. I just think that—" There was an awkward pause before Jack rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly. Or maybe he scratched his head. Hiccup was still working on interpreting the Guardian's actions. "Sorry, what was I talking about again?"

"Oh, you were pretty much ranting about how things get popularized just because certain aspects appeal to more people than the truth, such as how the yetis ought to get more recognition because of how unfair it was that the elves took the spotlight," Hiccup casually recited. A small chuckle escaped him. "Though, I think you started going off on a tangent because before you mentioned Phil and Dingle, it sounded more like propaganda about equal rights than anything else."

The ring of laughter reverberated in the winter morning, clear but slightly muted. "Sorry—I got carried away." Inwardly, Jack cringed. _'And this all came from me trying to explain to him that just because Old Man Winter was a popular interpretation of me, that didn't mean it was right. Maybe just talking about it isn't good enough?_' "None of that made much sense, did it?"

Hiccup shrugged. "It's okay." He cast his gaze to the town, encased by winter's grip. It was familiar and foreboding at the same time. "I'd rather have this world we're in be filled with the nonsensical than nothing at all." He'd rather have this world splashed with colors that ran and clumped together to form hideous and garish shades and variants than the definite and silencing void of the constant black and white.

The Ice Spirit examined his words: 'this world _we're_ in.' Jack looked around them; there wasn't another soul in sight. They walked as a pair, along the same path in entwined solitude. Still, there remained a comforting unity—the reassurance of togetherness that breathed life into the cold morning. And it was then that Jack truly realized the intimacy of this moment—that they were alone in 'this world' and it was more than okay. "Yeah—" the Guardian murmured, trying to ignore the quickened pace in his heart. "Same."

"You were lonely too, huh?" Another strange thing that Jack was slowly starting to like about Hiccup: he seemed to understand something that was left unsaid. "I can't imagine what that feels like, not being seen." Because for the near entirety of his short life, Hiccup was seen: the little mistake, the little accident, the little "hiccup." He was seen, yes, but never fully understood.

Jack smiled, though it was more for himself than Hiccup, though it had been years since the last time he even bothered to wholly despair over it, though he could never find it in himself to truly take these words seriously: "It's not so bad after a while—I mean, you get to see things that normal people can't, mess with things, get away with a lot of trouble, and people would be none the wiser!" He watched Hiccup closely, hoping that the happy façade that saturated his voice would save the atmosphere from desolation. This little outing was supposed to be _fun_.

Thankfully, Hiccup gave him a funny look in return: the comical cross-breed between amusement and horror. "I really feel like I should lock my windows from now on." Still, unbeknownst to Jack, the falsity in his humor wasn't lost to the younger teen.

Jack barked a laugh, though slightly offended. "Aw, c'mon, don't be like that!" It wasn't like he was some kind of pervert or anything.

Selective memory: he chose to deny the incident in the shower.

Hiccup shot him a distrustful glare. "I'm locking my doors too."

Jack scoffed. "Oh yeah, because that _really_ helped last time." Freudian slip: in his mind, the incident refused to be ignored. '_It was such a nice view_'—something mortifyingly annoying whispered in his thoughts. It was only when Hiccup flushed red and swiftly turned away did Jack wanted to smack himself for bringing _that_ up again. "Ah—"sorry. Did I mention you can say whatever you want, too? Even when you really _don_'t_ want to?" He tried hard to sound sorry; he really did. He hoped Hiccup would ignore the barely restrained mirth in his voice.

The teen frowned. "For some reason, that doesn't make me feel any more at ease with you. At all."

"Really?" Jack snickered. "Don't be scared! I don't bite." '_Unless you ask_'—wait, what?! '_Yes, Jack had to admit that although invisibility sucked, it had some good points to it. After all, without it Hiccup would be able to see the not-so-innocent thoughts of the Ice Spirit written all over his face. And then there would

come the Norwegian's questioning look again, the one that read, 'I don't know what you're up to and though I won't pursue it, just know that I'll be silently judging you.' In his defense, Jack was looking quite distraught about where those thoughts were coming from and perpetually feared that one of these days, they might just be voiced at the most inopportune of times.

Hiccup raised a brow. "What about frostbite?" With a grin he added, "Or nips?"

The Guardian's worry fell away. "Again with the nose-nipping?" Jack sighed. After more than fifty years, that joke was seriously getting old.

Hiccup smiled apologetically. "It's kind of what you're famous for." Jack threw his hands up in defeat. It'll be a cold day in Hel by the time he forgave whoever wrote that god-awful song that had basically eternized his name in attachment to that embarrassingly annoying phrase. Why on earth would he nip a nose?

In indignant justification, Jack felt the need to defend his position of power. "Hey for your information, I can do a lot more than just conjuring biting, cold weather." He posed proudly, staff in his hand. "I am the Guardian of Fun after all."

"Oh?" Hiccup grinned, pleased with the lighter direction their conversation was heading. Voice dripping with sarcasm, Hiccup decided that perhaps it was best to indulge his curious mind a bit while maintaining some dignity. "Is Old Man Winter going to show me a good time then?" Because he did want to know what Jack was actually capable of as a Guardian and whether or not Jamie had exaggerated in his story.

Jack, however, nearly choked, deciding that Hiccup shouldn't be allowed to say things like that, though the teen seemed none the wiser. Nevertheless the Spirit of Winter gathered himself and decidedly accepted the challenge with a cheeky smile. "Definitely." Jack paused before adding, "And, just to be clearâ€"there's nothing physically old about me either."

"Reallyâ€|well, I'm guessing from the way you talk and errâ€"carry yourself, you're probably very close to my age then." Another thing that Jack started liking about Hiccup: the boy was pretty clever. He looked straight at Jack with focused eyes, trained at pursuing a conclusion. "Hmâ€|definitely a teenager. Older than I am, though you certainly don't like acting it."

Jack smirked. "You guessed right." Sure he was considered a man at his age during the colonial epoch, but he certainly didn't behave in the appropriate manner. He loved letting stresses and worries dissolve in smiles and giggles, loved evading menial labor while chasing whims and liberties, loved spending time away from the fields to find a haven among thick forests and frozen lakes.

â€|That gave him an idea.

"So...what do you look like, exactly?" Hiccup eyes weren't focused on him anymore, as though he were trying and failing to find an image in his head that would best fit the Winter Guardian. "Since you want us to get to know each other, why don't you just tell me?"

Jack laughed as he flew into the air. "For that," he turned to Hiccup, "you're just going to have to wait and see!" Reaching out and taking Hiccup's hand without warning, the impatient spirit tugged the boy along, freezing over the pavement and ignoring Hiccup's piercing yelps. "I'm more of a 'show, don't tell' kind of guy!" It was faster getting around if Hiccup 'skated' rather than stumbled every few steps.

Besidesâ€|

"Wait? Wait for what!" Hiccup's loud screams decimated the barren peace of their world; his and Jack's combined hollers and howls of laughter splashed deafening shades, hues, and tints across where emptiness once manifested.

"C'mon! I want you to see something!" Jack guided the other teen swiftly but carefully, glad to see that Hiccup wasn't utterly terrified. Sure, he was scared but Jack could work with just plain scared.

Trembling slightly as smooth planes of ice formed miniature ramps that he was forced to slide and glide over, Hiccup was surprised he could manage to articulate the question coherently. "And that 'something' would be?"

Jack smirked and flew faster. "What I can really do."

Hiccup could only hold onto him tighter as they sped and wove through streets until the asphalt ended.

.

It had taken some amount of difficulty for Hiccup to let go of Jack's hand; it had taken more or less the same amount of difficulty for Jack to dismiss the sudden empty feeling in his fingers after prying off Hiccup's rather shaky ones.

"Oh, it was not _that_ bad." Jack rolled his eyes as the younger teen firmly planted himself on solid (snow-covered) ground.

Hiccup glared at him. "Says the Frost Spirit who almost smashed me against a mailbox, a wall, and three trees going at thirty miles per hour." Honestlyâ€|the audacity of it all.

Jack snickered. "See? It wasn't even that fast!"

Hiccup gave him a dry look.

"Okay, okay, so maybe I got a little carried awayâ€|_again_." Now that he looked at the boy, even though he ceased his quivering and was now simply frowning at him, Jack did feel a small ounce of regret for the wall episode. But even that didn't stop him from finding the hilarity in the situation. He held back a snicker as he apologized. "I'm sorry, okay?"

Hiccup rolled his eyes, but judging from the way the boy's lips quirked to a smile, Jack knew he wasn't in any trouble with the teen. "Yeah, it's fine." And it wasâ€|Hiccup had been a rather good snowboarder back at Berk*â€|not that he was going to tell Jack that

little tidbit of information. "Weirdâ€¦I usually don't mind that sort of paceâ€¦but I guess it's different when someone else has the control." Not yet at least.

"I know what you mean," Jack mumbled, just slightly guilty about the incident earlier with Sandy. Then again, Hiccup hadn't been able to hide the exhilaration in his eyes either. The little fishbone might have pretended to hate it, but he definitely enjoyed the ride to some extent.

"So, why'd you bring me out here?" It was calm in the woods, a muffled place that hid its secrets in seclusion; the trees stood idly by, some guarding in fortitude against the ravages of their death season. Hiccup turned his gaze to the lake before him, frozen like an old mirror with time permanently staining the glass. There was something eerily magical about this place. "Not thatâ€¦some Winter Sprite taking me to the middle of a forest is creepy in the slightest." The sensible side of him wanted to coolly turn backâ€¦and run like Armageddon was at his heels; that part of him crumbled at the very sight of the impossible being floating before him.

"Your sarcasm wounds me," Jack drawled.

Hiccup shrugged. "That's okay; as long as that's the only thing doing the wounding here."

"Ouch," Jack feigned injury. "Don't you trust me?"

"Famous last words," Hiccup snickered. He purposefully ducked as a slushy projectile was launched in his direction. He didn't take that to offense. "Okay, fine. I do. But you still haven't explained why you brought me here." Hiccup gestured to the wintry setting, curiosity nipping at him.

Jack smiled. "Well, I guessed that the best way for you to get to know me is to take you to where it all began." He floated down before the puzzled teen and rooted his staff upon the snow.

"Thisâ€¦" Hiccup scoured for the answer in his mind, a fragment of his memory zeroed in on Jamie's incredible tale from last night. At the shore of the glaciated waters, the significance of the excursion dawned on him. Hiccup turned to him with, eyes betraying astonishment. "This is the lake where you became a Guardian, isn't it?"

Jack leaned against his staff. "This lake is more than thatâ€¦" He held out his hand, his heart thrumming in erratic rhythms as Hiccup tentatively grasped his fingers. He led the boy carefully over the slippery ice, owing a bit of gratitude for the thick layer that safely bore their weight, safeguarding them from the frigid depths. Still, that didn't stop him from being extra careful with guiding the lanky boy. A tremor of fear trickled down his spine as memories resurfaced; he squeezed the teen's hand in reassurance. He gave a small grin at Hiccup's anticipation, the unbridled emotion that broke through the nervousness in vibrant viridian eyes. "This is the lake where I became Jack Frost." Jack had no problem revealing this at all.

Hiccup fought valiantly like an honorable man to stop himself from blurting out, '_Well that isn't creepy at all.'_ Instead, he gazed at

the frozen lake beneath his feet, imagining Jack's immortal triumph rather than his mortal defeat. "That'sâ€|rather poetic," he murmured, something welling up within him at the understanding that he was not a trespasser on sacred grounds. He was welcomed, accepted to share in the knowledge and nostalgia of the moment.

Jack released Hiccup's hand and cast his eyes towards the pallor of the skies. He caught the silvered outline of the lunar body. "You can blame the Man in the Moon for that." But in reality, Jack didn't blame him. At least, not out of spite. Because in this small and quiet moment, with this one boy he met three hundred years since the first and last time the Man in the Moon spoke to him, Jack couldn't help but feel like this was almostâ€|

Hiccup smiled softly, almost rueful. "He must like the Romantics."

Jack nearly sputtered. "What?"

Hiccup blinked. "Uh, by that, I meant the Romantic eraâ€|it dealt a lot with untamed nature and its connection with the human individual." He looked away, suddenly finding blurred reflections on the ice very interesting.

"Oh," Jack answered lamely, still trying to shake the embarrassment off.

Hiccup shifted on the ice, something that Jack took note of whenever an awkward silence had filled the atmosphere. "â€|So what was it that you wanted to show me?" He looked up at Jack with an expectant face, cheeks stained a little with a light pink.

"Oh, right!" Jack gripped the wooden staff, the familiar gnarls and twists emitting a glacial sensation. "Hold onâ€|" The Ice Spirit pondered for a second before smiling; this ought to give Hiccup a taste of what he was really made of.

Frost ferns erupted in patterns, decorating the ice with its intricate designs as Winter's staff pulsed in light tones of blue. It glossed the trees, making them gleam under the daylight peeking through the pines and clouds. Swirls of ice flowers bloomed and snaked across the landscape in frightening elegance. The winds danced and the leaves swayed while flakes of snow in soft flurries kissed the air in farewell as they fell in muted grace. Wintry gales embraced him as they picked up in momentum, lifting his spirit far beyond where the treetops stretched. It was cold, almost unbearably so, but that was strangely okay. There was a ghost of a smile on Hiccup's lips; it contained no sarcasm, no sly wit, no dry humor, but one that held a warmth of silent fervor. The world of death was not so; there was life hidden within the time of sleep before entering the thresholds of restoration.

"You knowâ€|this is the first timeâ€|in a very long time I've seen winter this way," Hiccup confided after a moment. His eyes were still following the movements of the wind.

Jack turned to him, eyes questioning. "What do you mean?"

"Wellâ€|" Hiccup shifted his gaze to the sky; the only thing that remained truly constant in life. "It snows so much back at Berk that

it was just so ordinary to me." He closed his eyes, mind tracing back to memories born not too long ago. "When the end of the year would come, the whole town would be afraid because winters were always so unforgiving." Hiccup shivered, but it wasn't from the winter chill he felt now, even as Jack frowned and the air around them plummeted in temperature. "My ancestors paid homage to the Gods and even you—or at least, who we thought was you—just so we wouldn't be devastated at the peak of season."

Jack bit his lip, hoping that it really wasn't him that Hiccup and his entire town had been afraid of all this time during the winter months. "I'm, uh, glad that this was a nice switch up for you," he offered meekly.

"Yeah, it was," Hiccup breathily agreed. "Winter's actually beautiful."

Jack tried his hardest to overlook that insufferable squeeze in his chest. "So, you're always talking about your hometown. And since I already showed you quite a bit about me, why not return the favor?" He hoped Hiccup wouldn't question his sudden change in subject.

"I guess that's fair?" Hiccup chuckled. "Fine, what do you want to know?"

Jack thought for a moment before selecting a mild topic. "Anyone you miss over there?"

"Oh, just a few good friends. A few relatives now and then—" Okay, for Hiccup, it was still a 'then.' It hadn't come to the 'now' part just yet. (In fact, not seeing Snotlout was still listed as one of the perks for moving away.)

Jack spouted it out before he could stop himself. "No one—special?"

"Special?" Hiccup blinked.

A shaky laugh tumbled from Jack's lips. "Oh, I dunno, a family friend, a good neighbor, a girlfriend, the old lady from down the street that would give you lemon wedges, a boyfriend—" Jack's voice trailed off to a mere whisper; unfortunately Hiccup possessed excellent hearing.

"What—" Surprisingly a simple question could make Hiccup's face redden faster than any winter chill.

"—the milkman—" Jack listed on; he wasn't trying to cover up that last thing he said. Of course not.

Hiccup frowned. "Hold on—" "

"The delivery guy?" Jack chuckled at the sight of Hiccup's irritated stare; even that was cute.

"No—no." Hiccup shook his head vigorously. "No little old ladies, it was a small town so practically everyone was your neighbor so that's a yes and a no, no girl—" he paused and looked away, beet red. "No guy either." Exactly how wrong was it that Jack felt just slightly victorious? "Aside from my friends and Gobber, there

really wasn't much to miss about Berk." Very wrong? He'd go with that.

Jack raised a brow. "Gobber?" Berkian people and their weird namesâ€

"My dad's friend and I guess, kind of my second father-figure." Hiccup smiled; he did miss the robust man quite a bit. Although he wasn't much good for advice and was terrible at listening, Gobber was at least always there and tried to helpâ€in his own way. Especially when it came to the subject of Hiccup's father. "I used to help out at his shop."

"Ohâ€so, uhâ€that's it?" Jack wondered if he should ask about his other friends, the ones that Hiccup didn't seem particularly interested in naming.

"That's it," Hiccup answered with finality. "Berk was always this tasteless and crude place; it was rich in history but shadows from the past made it gloomy most of the time. The people were usually disagreeable andâ€aggressive." Hiccup flinched, a phantom haunting in his memory. No, apart from a few people and the animals there, there really wasn't much to pine for.

Jack frowned. "What do you mean by that?"

Hiccup made small, confused gestures, like he was trying to catch the root of the problem with a tiny net. "They're so caught up in their old ways that they often kept away from things they didn't believe wereâ€normal."

"So, I'm guessing that meant you too, huh?" Jack knew that feeling very well, the solitude of being an outcast; they'd been companions for centuries now.

Hiccup gave him a defeated smile. "That obvious?"

Swinging his staff over to his side to lean against it, Jack eyed the boy and came to his previous conclusion: "Well, you're definitely not normal, Hiccup."

Hiccup snorted. "Thank you for summing that up."

"Hey, I like that about you," Jack defended with a grin.

"Yeah, you say that because you Guardians must be all about protecting children, their innocence, and imagination. So, I guess that means I never really grew up. At least not on the inside." Hiccup considered this for a second before randomly continuing, "I still consider dragons the coolest creaturesâ€no offense Jack."

"None taken." He did take offense to the horrible pun, however. _'Haha, yeah I get it, I'm supposed to be "cool" while dragons breathe fire but you find themâ€yeah. Real funny.'_

"Don't tell Toothless either." Jack, though crossing his fingers behind his back, visibly nodded. Hiccup faced Jack, but the Guardian of Winter had a feeling he wasn't really there anymore. "A part of me always believed that somehow, there was real magic in the world, some

things that people just weren't meant to find, mysteries that won't be solved by staring at equations or looking to books and dead men's philosophies."

Jack sighed, a little sullen that the earlier awe had been so ephemeral, but agreed all the same. "And you'd be right."

Hiccup continued, as though in a trance. "There are possibilities out there, things that can only come by taking chances that come, making mistakes, and learning from it. It's understanding that there are old ideas, new opportunities, but there could be novel outcomes and repeated failures." It seemed as though he had kept those thoughts in his head too long with only reverberations in reply.

"And you just keep at it?" Jack gently prodded. He knew Hiccup needed to keep going and maybe Jack would learn something along the way.

The younger teen nodded. "Yeahâ€¦there's nothing else to really do but that. Otherwise, we'd always be stuck in the past."

Jack thought for a second, the strange emotion swarming in his chest at what the boy revealed. He was back in that thoughtful mood again, all traces of a smile on his lips vanishing at the oppressive mood that settled onto the scene. But Jack thought back again to what he said and grinned, ready to show Hiccup just a little bit of this 'magic' that he had been searching for. "Soâ€¦dragons?" Because while Jack was prepared to allow Hiccup more time to divulge in the complexities that presided in his thoughts, Jack was sure that what he had in mind was just what Hiccup needed.

At the mention of the majestic beasts, Hiccup broke off from his daze. "Hm?"

"Dragons. I take it they're your favorite animal?" Jack grinned at the enthusiasm growing beneath Hiccup's guarded expression.

"Wellâ€¦fantasy creature, yes. Unlessâ€¦?" He looked to Jack with silently pleading eyes.

It hurt to tell him. "Uh, well, I've never personally seen one before." But that was a good question to ask someone ancient like Sandy later onâ€¦

"Oh. Well, in that case, yeah. They're my favorite fantasy creatures." Hiccup didn't seem too disappointed, but that didn't stop Jack from wanting to redouble his next efforts. He'd do this for Hiccup.

But just out of curiosityâ€¦ "And your favorite '_real_' animal?"

Hiccup sent him a bland look, as though the answer was the most obvious thing in the world: "Cats."

Jack rolled his eyes. "Of course."

Laughing a little, Hiccup had to say it: "Why?"

The Ice Spirit shook his head with a chastising 'tsk'. "You always seem to ask that. Wouldn't it be better to just sit back and watch?"

Hiccup pouted. "Watch whaâ€" "

Jack traced a crude sketch in the ice of a winged beast using the frost ferns that flowered at the tip of his staff. The end result appeared more like a velociraptor with butterfly wings no bigger than three feet etched onto the frozen lake.

Hiccup approached the artist, eyebrow raised at theâ€|interesting illustration. "Impressive."

Jack jabbed Hiccup in the rib with his elbow. "What did I say to you about watching?"

"Something about it being betâ€" "

And the creature came to life. Its limbs developed dimension, its body gaining form; the tail swung with the flow of motion while its wings fluttered in gentle vibrations as the head rose, tilted back in a noiseless roar. The ice-dragon eyed Hiccup with fleeting curiosity before it took off to loftier skies, soaring in aerial swivels and coils, trails of stardust twinkling in its wake. It twirled overhead, frost-patterned wings gleaming in awing flight. As it were, a wayward flake landed on Hiccup's nose, biting the skin there with a light chill. Jack had to step away as Hiccup nearly smacked him in his excitement as the dragon cautiously hovered over to him.

And while Hiccup's ecstatic eyes were fixated on the of the Guardian's creation as it skimmed through the winter air, Jack's attention was trained on zealous teen before him, wide-eyed with wonder and crying out in spirited shrieks of "Did you see that!", "Oh, wow this is _so_ cool!", and "Where did it go?". His movements were full of energy as he twisted and spun around to catch sight of the dragon as it hid away into the maze of trees before darting back to the middle of the lake. His eyes shone with a brightness that gave life to their world of white that no smear of color and no animated ice-being could hope to replicate. This was what Jack wanted to seeâ€"this Hiccup who let go of the tense talks for breathy exaltations, who laughed freely rather than snickering, who beamed with happiness rather than applying a carefully concealed smile or a snarky grin, who began to love the snow and found it _fun_, who saw his creation in a new light and called it _beautiful_.

Jack grinned, a little winded himself as he continued to watch Hiccup, his thrill unfading. "You're welcome."

"Jack, thank you, it'sâ€" " Hiccup turned to him and Jack swore his heart stopped. "It's amazingâ€"you're amazingâ€|"

His smile wouldn't be called beautiful by most people. It was awkward with his slightly crooked teeth, somehow paralleling with his crooked smile, sheepish from his words that tumbled with slight humiliation that tainted his transparent delight; his lips were chapped from walking around all morning and Jack also suspected them to be victims of innumerable pensive thoughts and enduring worries. It was ordinary and in a way, kind of cute with Hiccup's gleaming eyes and freckles that seemed to disappear under the rouge blush, but for many, it

certainly wasn't beautiful.

But for Jack, it was perfect; it made his blood rush to his face and halt the formation of proper sentences from his mouth, made him insanely giddy as something in his stomach fluttered with ceaseless frenzy, made him laugh a mere dull echo of the triumphant cry that sang in his soul. And for the first time, Jack didn't deny it. He knew exactly what it was and he almost berated himself for ignoring the budding emotion for so long.

It was the first inklings of romance, the earth shifting below them in staggering quakes in imminent natural disasters and dying stars exploding to spew forth new creation from the gaping maw left in its wake—it was possibility and promises personified in ambrosial poisons and perfumed with the initial innocence before thorns of wicked roses drove themselves into the Winter Guardian's heart. It left him vulnerable and exhilarated, dizzy and hopeful, scared and euphoric. It was wrong, it was stupid, it had to be a mistake—but it was there. He sees its existence, just as Hiccup sees his. It subsists there, for him: the gangly boy with freckles that scattered across his cheeks and button-nose like miniature constellations that framed those impossibly green eyes, eyes that glowed with curiosity and shone with intelligence; the soft-spoken boy whose words dripped with sarcasm and whose mind operated on paradoxical logics. And it was because of him that Jack knew that he had to get Hiccup to truly believe.

And no, it definitely wasn't just because Jack was undoubtedly crushing on him.

* * *

><p>Oh puppy love&|<p>

*= Hiccup's got mad snowboarding skills, as seen in a commercial Dreamworks made for the Winter Olympics.

If you follow the series *Dragons: Riders of Berk*, Snotlout's been an insufferable jerk lately. Well, more so than usual.

...Did I just steal and flip Astrid's line from the movie?
(whoops.)

10. Sleepovers & SentinelStoic & Snowfights

Painter Chuck Close once said that only amateurs wait for inspiration to strike them before working. By that, I think he meant that true professionals sit down and create, regardless of whether or not the Muses have bestowed upon them motivation. It is not for the genius to create art, but for the artist to create genius. While I'm certainly no genius, let's see what kind of work I can do. (So uh&|sorry if it sucks.) This is a two-for-one chapter since I didn't update last weekend due to my writing competition.

Just Call Me Endy and AncestorsEcho&|“you'll get tired of me saying this one day, but I cannot thank both of you enough for helping me with edits, suggestions, ideas, and improving myself for this story and as a writer. And a big thank you to all you wonderful readers out there&|“knowing that you enjoy my story both astounds and heartens

me.

AND HOLY HELL I GOT 1ST PLACE IN MY DISTRICT WRITING COMPETITION and that means I advance to regionals for a shot at going to state. Thank you, everyone for the confidence boost!

****Disclaimer:**** I own nothing but a laptop and certain plot elements.

* * *

><p>It was easy to forget. Time stretches on, unending and enduring, seasons budding and flowering before they wilt and die, stars bursting to brilliant supernovas before birthing new creations, stardust composing novel verses in life. And life persistsâ€”Life and Time: two beings along one shared road, hopelessly entangled, fated. Yet in that moment, immortalized by the persistence of memory, the latter held no meaning. Because in that moment of terrifying clarity and bracing happiness, it did not matter that Time would sooner tear them apart because it was Time that entwined their existence, their one chance encounter that evolved to this one desperate hope. There are many complications in this world but meshing within the blurring lines are simple strands of truth: in that moment, Jack Frostâ€”<p>

â€”had never felt more like a stalker than he did now.

Hiccup shifted in his sleep, made visible by the way moonbeams highlighted every fold and crease on the thin comforter as the Norwegian slumbered on, physically worn from the day's outing. Only the crown of his head peeked from beneath the covers, auburn strands splayed out on the pillow, as his body curled for warmth. Jack sighed as he once more eyed the steady and rhythmic rise and fall of the blanket; Hiccup was out like a light.

The Ice Spirit pressed his palm against the window, frost ferns sprawling against the glass at his touch. They bloomed in dainty swirls and Jack frowned as they outlined the figure tucked under the covers. He scowled and flushed red when the traitorous designs framed the boy's image with a frosted heart.

In muted mortification, Jack fervently tried to smudge the embarrassing little thing awayâ€”only to succeed in breeding more of those humiliating telltale patterns. He tried to stifle a groan as, within a short span of thirty seconds, the whole window was covered in icy little hearts. He supposed now was a good time to stop before the whole house was veiled by his apparent unspoken attraction_.

For Jack, it was slightly terrifying how much had changed after such a tiny (actually very enormous) epiphany. So what? He (really, really) liked the guy. That's all. They spent the whole day at the frozen lake talking nonsense (just to hear the sound of the younger's voice), Jack showing (off) his other abilities, Hiccup tracing proper dragons for Jack to bring to life (just to make Hiccup lighten up in that adorable way he does whenever anything dragon-related was involved), Hiccup slipping on the ice when he chased the flying ice-creatures, and Jack catching him (and maybe holding on a little bit longer than he should have) to make sure he didn't suffer a concussion.

Sure, it all seemed very ordinaryâ€¦

(Yes, definitely ordinary for Jack)

But now there was no way Jack could ignore the acceleration of his heart at every interval that Hiccup got a little too close to him, or how his pallid cheeks would easily color when the teen's eyes just happened to meet his by some stroke of luck, or how in so many instances when he caught the teen from falling flat on his face, something very spontaneous and very stupid in him wanted to keep the boy in his arms a little while longer and perhaps do something absolutely crazy that appealed to the Guardian in every physical way (mentally, however, he feared the predicted outcome of committing such an act). That feeling once again resurfaced when he brought Hiccup home; they stood awkwardly at his doorstep, stumbling around for words in timid thanks and pie-crust promises to have another day like that sometime soon. It was only after Hiccup finally closed the door, separating him from Jack, that the Winter Guardian acknowledged two things:

Yes, that felt very much like the ending of the first date; his treacherous mind even had the gall to wonder at what date was he allowed to steal a kiss.

And yes, he had come to terms that what he originally dubbed as that "something stupid" feeling that always occurred around Hiccup was that scarily intense impulse to grab the boy by the back of the head and kiss the living daylights out of him. Was it the third date that he'd have the chance to do so? He really hoped it was.

(Was that so wrong that thoughts like that kept popping up?

Yes, yes it was; Jack thought so too.)

The Frost Spirit smacked his head against the cool glass, eliciting a shuttering thud as the window rattled. How did having a _crush _work anyways? What the heck was he supposed to do when his thoughts were in tangles and his body just wanted Hiccup physically near him? (Un)fortunately for Jack, a startled "Mreow?" sufficiently disrupted his internal conflict. A grimace souring his expression, Jack shifted his attention to the dim bedroom.

The Guardian frowned as he lifted his head and came face-to-face with a disgruntled Norwegian Forest Cat on the opposite side of the window, pawing at the barrier between them as if trying to shoo the Ice-Child away. Figures Hiccup would let the little demon sleep in his room; Jack wasn't surprised one bit.

The next noise, however, nearly caused him to fall off the second-story window pane. "You know, I wasn't kidding about keeping my windows locked."

Recovering rather quickly, Jack plastered a too-pleasant smile on his face that dripped down to his words. "You were awake?" He blinked the stars out of his vision as Hiccup flicked on a lamp, illuminating the teen's bedroom and revealing the lethargic teenager.

The brunet yawned and stepped sluggishly out of bed, his oversized sleeping-shirt slipping off the side to bare a shoulder. "For some

time, yeah?" Jack was very glad to use this 'he-can't-see-me' issue to his advantage to openly ogle the sight; who knew that in Hiccup's case, "exhausted" translated to "cute"?

Jack somehow found his voice again. "O-oh. Oops, did I wake you?" He had to commend himself for the performance; it was increasingly difficult to keep his voice straight when he had been caught outside his crush's window and when said crush was currently coming towards him.

Hiccup rested his forearms against the window pane, head bowed as if his fatigue rendered him unable to meet Jack's gaze. "Nah, ever been so tired that you can't fall asleep?" He yawned and rubbed his eyes in an entirely casual manner, yet Jack deemed the act entirely adorable.

The Guardian chuckled. "Kid, I've been a spirit for quite some time now. I haven't needed sleep in ages."

Hiccup nodded inattentively, eyes closed. "Hm, okay then, well I couldn't sleep and I feel a little dead right now." His words were starting to slur and Jack was somewhat hoping that such a minor aspect was a good indication for lowered inhibitions.

Of course, not for that kind of purpose. Jack shifted awkwardly, something he feared was a result from spending enough time with Hiccup. "Err, so?" He really needed to check his thoughts.

"Hm?" Hiccup turned to him, eyebrows raised yet eyes decidedly shut; Jack swallowed a snicker at the sight.

The Winter Spirit tapped the glass in both an effort to wake the teen and to emphasize his response. "You gonna let me in?" Jack grinned in amusement as the noise snapped Hiccup out of his sleep-spell, the brunet blinking the tiredness from his eyes.

Toothless glowered at the request, hair bristling at his human's movements towards the window's latch. The younger teen vaguely noted an interesting pattern of frost on his window. 'What are those hearts?' but was interjected as Toothless planted himself firmly between the dazed brunet and the glass. Hiccup eyed his furry friend with befuddlement before shaking his head, deciding to disregard any more details that were beyond his comprehension at this point.

"This'll either turn out to be either a really awkward comedy or a really bad horror movie," the teen murmured.

"Ha ha ha, now you going to just sit there or are you gonna open the window? It's freezing out here." Hiccup rolled his eyes, but Jack caught the smile he tried to hide.

Hiccup plucked Toothless from his perch, eliciting a noise of complaint from the feline as he plopped the furry creature on his bed and silently commanded him to stay. To Jack, he mumbled, "Yeah, yeah whatever you say Frosty."

Now Jack felt really insulted. And quite disgusted. "Did you just call me Frosty? After the freaking snowman?"

The younger shrugged as he turned back to the Guardian. "I am sleepy and am therefore not liable for any nonsense that spews from my mouth at this ungodly hour."

Jack snickered. "You've been spewing nonsense all day."

Hiccup sent him a sour look. "Do you want to get in here or not?"

The Ice Spirit stepped aside in wait of the other's reluctant consent. "If you would be so kind."

Sighing, Hiccup undid the latch and with some effort, managed to push the window up high enough for Jack to crawl inside. He sidestepped to give Jack some room to land on, assuming Jack flew in there judging by the sudden gust of wintry air; but Hiccup wasn't really paying attention. "So, any particular reason as to why you were creeping around my bedroom window?"

'_What, are you looking for something like "I couldn't stay away", or something equally sappy?_' Instead, Jack shrugged and looked around the teen's rather bare room; then again, Hiccup did just move here. "Nope, not in particular." He eyed a plethora of doodles and scribbles scattered around a large desk; upon closer inspection, Jack found them to be rather good portraits of Toothless.* Tacked on the wall were some interesting sketches of dragons—some of which Jack had created for Hiccup that afternoon. '_This kid's really obsessed with 'em—|_'

Hiccup plopped down on the bed, startling Toothless beside him. "Okay then," he replied, voice muffled by the covers. Toothless mewed and nudged the boy with a cold nose. Hiccup frowned but rolled over anyways, giving Toothless the expanse to stretch.

Jack smirked. "You're a lot more agreeable when you've been deprived of sleep, aren't you?"

Lying on his back now, Hiccup aimed a finger at Jack's general direction. "Yup. Tell anyone and I'll sic Toothless on you."

The Winter Guardian chuckled, unaware that the space provided by Hiccup allotted Toothless the vantage point to strike. He gave the signal while Jack continued on to say, "Ooh, scary—ack!" Hiccup giggled (and yes, to Jack _that_ was definitely a drunken little giggle that spilled from the teen's lips) as the room clamored with the sweet symphony of revenge. Jack scoffed, having been forced to retreat to the top of a cabinet, an area much too cramped for the feline to even think about pouncing. "Evil little thing."

The furry devil eyed Jack with a glint of triumph before trotting back over to his human, purring as he was rewarded with a scratch under his chin. "Good boy, bud. I think Jack gets the idea, so why don't we play nice for now, hm?" The feline sent him a dry look—familiar even to Jack. The spirit shook his head; he certainly takes after his owner. Nevertheless, Toothless relented and settled himself at the foot of the bed, back turned to the Guardian in a temporary show of truce. Hiccup sat up and turned over towards Jack, exhaustion taking a toll once more. "Well, it's late so I'm just going to settle for the idea that you need a place to stay for the

night. I offer you the floorâ€" A sheer cold draft later and Hiccup opened his eyes to find a shadowy figure tucked under one side of the blanket. He tried not to let exasperation cake his already weary mind. "â€okay, other half of the bed's fine." Hiccup ignored the warning signs of a really bad horror movie coming into play.

Jack grinned. "D'ya mind?"

Hiccup shrugged, too tired to even argue.

Whistling lowly, Jack remarked, "Better make a note of this sleep-deprivation thing for future referenceâ€"

"Hey, that's notâ€fairâ€using," Hiccup yawned. "My weaknessesâ€against meâ€" Why did it have to be difficult to keep one's eyes open?

"Shh, I think you need to go to bed." Jack pulled the opposite half of the blanket aside for Hiccup to slip under, patting the empty space to coax the sleepy teen to slumber (and hopefully to stop him from questioning the circumstance any further).

The teen grumbled incoherently but caved into sweet promise of the cozy warmth that awaited him beneath the covers...only to lie down to find it freezing cold to the touch. Hiccup groaned weakly. "Nghhâ€"

Jack smirked at the little noise Hiccup made, unwitting to the discomfiture he caused. "Heh, that's pretty cute."

A little bit more alert due to the unexpected chill, Hiccup threw a glare at the Guardian. "Don't make me regret this, Jack."

"Hush," Jack chided. "Go to sleep."

"If I remember any of this tomorrow, there willâ€" Hiccup yawned once more. "â€be consequences for you, sir. _And_ you'll owe me a proper explanation." Using the last bit of his energy, Hiccup reached over to the bedside lamp, soon enveloping the room in darkness.

Jack couldn't help but smile at the empty threat, even as the void of night swallowed them whole with only the moon as their sentinel. "Whatever you sayâ€my dear Viking Prince."

Hiccup scowled at the title. "Toothless. Attack."

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Sometime during the night, Hiccup rolled away further from Jack, limbs nearly dangling off the side of the bed. Jack was a bit ashamed to mentally admit that he secretly hoped that Hiccup would be a cuddler in his sleep. But he wasn't exactly to blame; Jack had been without death's brother for centuries and he still had these strange thoughts burst forth from the strangest depths of his brain. They were quiet moments in which nothing existed but the odd ponderings of an eternal adolescent. One can only imagine what kinds of ideas and revelations ran through the Winter Guardian's head in these hoursâ€

And it was then that he finally realized it: he was going to

sleep"â€

â€"in Hiccup's bed.

Beside Hiccup.

Who he had a crush on.

Blood couldn't rush to his face fast enough. It didn't make sense; Jack was fairly sure everything was peachy not too long ago. So why did it now seem as though he made an undoubtedly horrible choice?

Now, Jack wasn't all too sure about dating etiquette considering he hadn't even thought about that sort of thing in let's say, oh, three hundred years, but he was pretty sure that he missed a couple of steps to get hereâ€or that he was horribly behind (probably meaning that either he was lucky or he was just friend-zoned). Either way, all sense of rest or relaxation flew out of the Guardian's mind as he tried to sort the meaning of this situation as Hiccup slept on, blissfully unaware of the Ice Spirit's self-imposed turmoil.

Thankfully for Jack, the Sandman was never late for his nightly rounds. Jack blinked as a slithering brightness pervaded the once-still room; Dreamsand snaked its way through the shadows towards its unsuspecting target and those worrisome musings ceased at once.

The Frost Spirit glanced at Hiccup's face, vulnerable and inexpressive as though he trapped his secrets behind a fragile mask. Looking at the younger teen that way, Jack couldn't help but wonderâ€|

He supposed it was a little wrong to have a peek at Hiccup's dreams, but Jack couldn't find it in himself to tear his gaze away from the rivulets of gold as they glided through the tranquil night air; it was enticing and drew him towards a trance through unbidden curiosity. The glittering grains swarmed in clusters, dancing in tuneless melodies to the dreams of the dozing teen beside him. When streamlets of stardust sprouted wings, a snout, and a tail, it came as no surprise for Jack to behold a tiny sunburst of a recognizable dragon, looping in daring dives and swivels to Hiccup's subconscious accord. Jack couldn't say he was somewhat disappointed by what he deemed as the obvious.

Though, what did come as a pleasant(ly wonderful) surprise to Jack were the little snow crystals that accompanied the majestic little terror in flight. The Winter Guardian smiled, eyes tracing the stream of Dreamflakes that trailed after a fluttering tailfin of what Hiccup called a _Natt Skrekk._*

Leaning towards a drifting Dreamflake, Jack caught it by the finger, stunned and enchanted to see the little grains bloom into a tiny heart. It hovered over Jack's outstretched hand before it circled overhead the brunet, the original reverie locked in a soundless flow, colliding with but welcoming of the impossible emotion that joined in soaring with the impossible creature. The heart lagged behind in tandem, chasing in the dragon's intricate flight before they began to sail together, intertwined in unison. It would be quite some time

before morning bade away the illusions, but nothing existed for the two cherished wishes but that moment, cycling, and everlasting, even from a mere memory of a dream. And Hiccup smiled, a tiny quirk of his lips that was hardly evident but one that definitely wasn't there before, and that was enough for Jack.

He didn't exactly know when he moved or how he managed the feat without waking the other teen, but Jack got his arm around the smaller boy, feeling his warmth seep through centuries of sleet and silence—this was enough for him. In this one moment, Jack was fairly sure that he'd love nothing more than to hold on to this one witty, freckled, bright-eyed teen forever.

But a niggling voice that once fed mollifying thoughts to his mind murmured in hushed malice: '_But it'll never last, will it?' _For now, he pushed those thoughts aside.

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Cupid sometimes wondered how she adopted such a legacy—and how utterly wrong it all was.

The spiders crawled about, scurrying, clamoring, and scuttling, weaving their threads—ties that bind in intricate patterns, threads sewn in sealed fates. Silken portraits hung from the near-heightless ceilings of Love's Domain, some rotting in the stale stench of age and others woven as she walked through the mazes of silk and webs.

It was inspection day. And during such tedious work, her mind tended to wander, fleeting in past and present.

She is a pitiful creature, some say. Too much has been seen, too much blood has been spilt in her name, and too many epitaphs and sonnets have depicted only caricatures of her vile existence. Before, her cheeks would flush a pretty red (red, a color of passion, a color of bravery, a brash hue in the spectrum that shouted its name in glory and defiance, red, the only color she ever loathed and never quite loved), glowing with pride at her feats (feats, her feats that have procured short lifetimes of euphoria but have perverted to ugliness with its dying breath, leaving her deviled doppelganger to rot in the cavity that once housed two hearts that beat as one), only to remain stoic in the endless durations of human capacity that seemed to have passed.

She stops before a woven portrait of a woman, unraveling at the seams. She gingery touches it and frowns as the dull, burgundy webs fall away revealing chilling truths: of course it was all for greed. The pretty face of the daughter of an affluent family was _loved_ by many (the most sickening travesty of its kind, bred from ravenous wallets rather than lovelorn hearts). But that is what these times call _love_, she laments. A type of love. A hollow love. A love that isn't love at all but merely smears its name by stealing its skin. Still, that did not mean that love in its truest form was any better.

She eyed her spiderlings, eight-legged little monsters scampering this way and that within the infinite designs of obsidian chance and ruby ardor, entangling the hearts and fortunes of mankind with their binding threads.

No, love is not beautiful. It's terrifying and masks its decay with flowery scents and candied honey that blinds the senses to its toxins, toxins that drug the brain, interweaves the body in inescapable webs, and devours the heart with smiling fangs. It's devastation and heartbreak strapped to a timer, merrily ticking away precious hours and memories to store in its arsenal to exude a more excruciating impact. It's a parasite, feasting upon its host while the emotion grows grotesque and fat from overindulgence. It's ephemeral, shamefully so, and more twisted and dangerous than any game ever fabricated by the faceless figure known as fate.

(At least, most of the timeâ€|)

After numerous steps through mazes of hanging portraits, she halted in her scheduled maintenance, curiosity piqued. "Well nowâ€|this looks interesting." The arachnids ceased their squirming and gathered to observe the "interesting" sight.

This tapestry was of a boy: a certain immortal spirit of icicles and frost. Cupid grasped a thread of black, pleased by its grip and hold; she noted a number of others and tested their strengths.

"Few but firm," she noted.

In a dim room filled with nothing but spiders and thread, it was almost impossible to notice one weak little sliver of bright red silk against the others. But for a woman with a trained eye and a millennium of expertise, such a rarity was too much of a marvel to simply dismiss.

She grazed the thin strand with a fingernail, almost afraid that in its frailty it would break at the slightest touch. Cupid hummed and followed the trail, partly out of curiosity, mostly because it wasâ€|troubling that the other recipient seemed to be quite a distance off.

After what seemed like oceans away, the personification of love stood before another interesting discovery at exactly who captured Jack Frost's affections.

"We seem to have a dilemmaâ€|" She sighed and for the first time in a while, wondered of the future.

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It had taken a lot of effort on Hiccup's part not to shriek in absolute terror at waking to the sight of shadowy arms clinging to him; it took even more effort not to question Jack on what transpired between the time he closed his eyes and the moment he opened them again.

The hardest thing of all however, was escaping the near-death grip the Ice Spirit had on him. But he made it workâ€|somehow it all came to success after Hiccup contorted himself and ended up almost spraining a muscle to wriggle free from the snoozing spirit; sure, Jack didn't need to sleep, but apparently that didn't mean he couldn't sleep like the dead either. Of course, it was only after Hiccup was sprawled on the floor from wrestling himself from Jack's grip did the Guardian stir and wake.

Thankfully, neither said a word. Part of that could be attributed to Toothless still slumbering not two feet away; it was never a good idea to startle a cat awake.

After an awkward moment of dressing on Hiccup's part and an increasingly embarrassing episode for Jack (though he merely averted his gaze since he was still too drowsy to fret much over it), the brunet walked down the stairs with a still-sleepy Ice Spirit barely floating behind him. Again, the weird-horror-movie feeling was making its way to Hiccup's brain. He shook the thought out of his head before he permanently associated Jack with cheap Hollywood effects. The teen paused as he caught sight of his father standing at the foot of the steps, dressed for work and with a composed expression on his rugged face.

"_Good morning Hikke. Remember, you'll be taking care of the Bennetts again today. I'll be back home a bit later tonight, so dinner might have to wait."_ The man spoke in his native tongue, the unexpectedness and gruff voice startling Jack and in turn almost making Hiccup miss a step and topple down the stairs.

Steadying himself, Hiccup nodded to the towering man and responded in like. "_Okay dad, I'll be sure to keep an eye on them. And don't worry; I'm perfectly capable of feeding myself."_ He gave him a quick smile to ensure his father that nothing was out of the ordinary and that there definitely wasn't a Winter Spirit in the room, tip-toeing towards his father as though he were a ferocious animal.

Jack openly gaped. "Woah, _that's_ your dad?" Jack counted himself lucky that Hiccup couldn't do anything to him in response at the moment. Judging by the way Hiccup started to fidget, the teen was itching to clear some distance between him and the robust man.

Stoick returned the nod. "_Good." _Heading to the door, the man halted mid-step as though sensing something amiss. He turned back to his startled son with a perplexed air and seemed to search for the right words to say. "_Alsoâ€¦be careful Hikke. It's gotten a bit chilly so a small snowstorm might be on its way."_

All the while, Jack gestured wildly to the man as Hiccup outdid his earlier efforts in remaining perfectly calm while witnessing the Guardian's antics. "He's a giant! He might be bigger than North!"

Hiccup waved with a placid smile on his lips, hoping to the heavens and Valhalla and Odin and Thor and whoever else his ancestors worshiped that Jack would refrain from pulling on his dad's beard. "_Will do dad. Bye!"_

His smile twitched as Jack looked to him, indicated to his dad's face, and commented, "That's real? Guys still grow beards that long nowadays?"

Thankfully, Stoick departed with nothing more than a "_See you tonight, son." _and a swift shut to the door before any stray mounds of snow puddled on the welcome mat.

Hiccup swiveled to the Ice Spirit, about to interrogate why in _Hel_

Jack did what he did when the Winter Spirit beat him to the punch. "Hikke?" The word cut through the formerly tense silence. Although Hiccup couldn't see it, he could imagine a puzzled face that concealed some speck of amusement.

Hiccup blinked before groaning; he honestly hoped that the word would have been lost between all the other words and phrases. "It's my nickname in Norwegian." He opened the coat closet to dress himself for the external elements; it would be better for them to meet up with Jamie and Sophie early so they could sufferer, share some time with Jack too. He wasn't trying to pass off the Guardian or anything; of course not.

Jack grinned and it showed in his voice as he followed Hiccup out the door. "that's pretty"

Hiccup tensed as he turned the lock, cheeks flushing, and refusing to even look at the Frost Spirit. "If you say 'cute' I swear I'll"

"Hiccup! Jack!" They were immediately cut off from the awkward bout of teasing that was sure to ensue as the Bennett siblings scrambled through the snowy yard to reach the teens.

"Jamie, Sophie!" the two called awkwardly, subconsciously distancing themselves.

It wasn't until they heard the echoes of, "Hey, wait up guys!", "I wanna see 'em too!" and of the ilk that the teens realized that they were conferencing with the entire entourage.

"And friends!" Hiccup and Jack chorused with off-balanced enthusiasm. Hiccup took the liberty of taking a few steps back as the children crowded around them, beaming with excitement shimmering in their eyes. The Norwegian gulped; he had a bad feeling about this

Pippa shook the eldest Bennett's arm with enthusiasm as the two teens stood side-by-side. "Woah, Jamie, you were serious!"

Claude grinned, though shocked if anything. "Yeah! Hiccup can actually see Jack and everything!"

The Winter Spirit's mood dimmed at the reminder, but he tried not to let it show too much; it probably wouldn't bode well for either of them if the children knew Hiccup couldn't _actually_ see him.

Hiccup nervously shifted once more, hoping to evade the actuality of the statement. "Uhm, well I oof!" He tried not to glare at the Guardian whose elbow (at least, he was sure it was) just jabbed him in the gut. But he was probably right; opening that can of worms wouldn't be exactly the best thing to do in front of a horde of inquisitive and meddlesome children.

Caleb scratched his head, "Huh, guess that makes you one of us now."

Monty stepped closer to the babysitter, bubbling with animation. "And that makes you totally"

"Cool" Cupcake sighed. The glare that followed the strange looks

was to be expected.

Everyone shared a brief, stifled moment of awkwardness before Jack clasped his hands together and offered the perfect remedy on such a glorious winter day: a snowball fight. The children cried out in unison and scrambled about to take shelter. Hiccup set his base at the left side of the yard as commander. Deciding that it was only appropriate, Jack took to the opposite team as Hiccup allied himself with the other half of the children. Cupcake and Monty, unsurprisingly, stuck to the brunet's side along with Caleb and Claude.

Jack gave them a look of bemusement and amusement as his thoughts wandered to the disturbing epiphany that he was currently Cupcake's rival for Hiccup's affectionsâ€|

(And perhaps the same could be said of Monty as well.)

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Jack grinned as he sped through the air, the sound of laughter ringing in his ears. He caught sight of Hiccup, stumbling for the fifth time through the slush before ducking effectively behind the enemy's fortress. The Guardian snickered. "Hah, careful or you'll slip again, _Hikke_" '_Too easyâ€|'_

Hiccup scowled as he peeked through the bastion. "Hey, watch it _Frosty_" It dissolved to a frown as he watched the shadow glide effortlessly through the winter winds. The brunet rolled his eyes. '_Showoffâ€|and besides, _"You'd be surprised to see howâ€|"'

"Totally uncoordinated you are? Yeah, it was real fun saving you from splitting your head open all yesterday!" Jack chuckled as Hiccup turned an interesting shade of red, starting towards him for redemption.

It was cuter when the teen started stuttering. "T-that wasâ€|ow!"

It really shouldn't have come as a surprise that Jack, ever the opportunist, utilized the stammer by pelting the poor boy with snowballs mid-sentence. Jack smirked in victory; the captain had fallen and shall now sink with the ship. He whooped as Hiccup stayed down, literally blanketed by the frosty projectiles. He turned to his teammates with the intent of celebrating the auspicious conquest when he was met with a sly grin from his first Believer.

"So, you guys hung out together _all_ yesterday?" Jack's grin froze. He didn't quite know how to interpret that questionâ€|"Jamie was, after all, only nine. Still, it didn't exactly help when his smile was a little too wide. '_What would a nine-year-old think of two teens hanging out all day and one of them sleeping over anyways?_'

Jack let out a nervous laugh and mentally kicked himself for being flustered by what could have been an innocent inquiry of the earlier events. "Uhâ€|"ah, yeah! It was fun, yeahâ€|_real fun_. I mean, we just kinda hung out yanno? Pretty much a casual, everydayâ€|"ack!" '_I'm hitâ€|"!_' and the captain went down. Jack tried not to sound too betrayed as Jamie and Sophie burst out laughing once his face hit

the snow.

Hiccup dusted off the remaining frost from his sweater. "Oh that reminds me, Jack: you still owe me an explanation for coming into my bedroom last night." Jack was honestly glad that no one could see his face burning red with the insinuation (which was probably correct; still, that was beside the point).

Getting up and trying to redeem some honor, Jack blurted out the first thought that crossed his mind: "Hey, you opened the window!" He did not want to look back to see Jamie's expression for that.

The teen gave him a noncommittal shrug. "Yeah, but you were the one just sitting out there like a helpless stray."

"Not my fault you'd agree to anything when you're sleepy!" the spirit rebuked.

Crossing his arms, the brunet gave Jack a pointed look. "I was only tired because of your little outing."

Jack was offended; it was their outing. "Yeah, and I wasn't from saving your accident-prone butt?"

That was about the closest Jack had ever seen Hiccup bristle. "I am not accident-prone."

The Winter Guardian rolled his eyes. "Dude, you've got the grace of a beached walrus." 'That's right. I went there.'

Hiccup swallowed a biting bit of sarcasm that threatened to revile the smug-voiced shadow, instead opting for a defensive approach. "Well I have my own way around snow and ice. In fact, I was the best snowboarder back at Berâ€"

"You were?" Both teens (once again) paused awkwardly as they cognized the small troupe of children curiously gathered around them during their verbal scuffle.

Hiccup sighed, cheeks flushed scarlet. "Yes. Is that so unbelievable?"

"Well, guessing since it's youâ€" Jack stopped himself right there, just before Hiccup's glare turned absolutely murderous. "Ahaha, but if you say so, why don't you put your money where your mouth is?" He smirked as the children whispered amongst themselves in anticipation, all the while thinking, 'Is he serious? No way can that guy be graceful at anything.' Plus, it did kind of add to the teen's weird charmâ€| but Jack didn't really want to focus on that part of his brain right now.

There was yet again a chorus of intermingling words and phrases along the lines of "Yeah, Hiccup!", "C'mon!", "I really wanna see this!", and "This'll be soo awesome!" Hiccup mentally sighed; no he was not that stupid thirteen-year-old anymore. He was a mature adolescent perfectly capable of averting peer pressureâ€|especially since said "peers" were a parade of nine-year-olds, a three-year-old, and one centuries-old Spirit of Winter.

Jack smirked and though he knew Hiccup wouldn't be able to see it, he

let his words dictate his expression. "So, yeah, Hiccup? These little hills around Burgess aren't exactly mountains, but with a little winter magic, I'm sure I can make it work." He whipped up a flurry of snow to prove his point.

Hiccup just continued to glare at him with a dry look. "And what do I get out of it?"

The Norwegian tried not to cringe at the sad symphonies of "Aww", "c'mon please?", "But it'll be so much fun!" No. Hamish "Hiccup" Haddock III will no longer be swayed by such childish antics. He planted himself firmly on the conviction that there was no possible way that he'd be weaseled into this.

The Guardian of Fun sighed. "All right, all right—how 'bout this: if you are the extreme snowboarder like you say you are—I'll give you that explanation you wanted. If not, then I get off scot-free! Deal?" Jack inwardly chuckled. '_Kills two birds with one stone that way.'_ Unfortunately for Jack, he failed to realize that the bet went both ways.

The bland stare that Hiccup sent him revealed neither effectiveness nor concern. "Really? That's it?"

"Well—unless you're—'_chicken_'." Yes, Jack figured that was a low blow; he could tell by what inevitably followed after one uttered the "C" word within the vicinity of nine-year-olds.

"Ooohh..." Did Hiccup's eye just twitch? Jack certainly hoped that was a pretty good indication that the teen's stubborn-streak was crumbling from the awesome might of Jack's effectual persuasion skills. The Guardian's smirk couldn't get any wider lest it threatened to split his face in half. It was difficult to turn away from the challenge with children around to witness and judging by the growingly peeved look on Hiccup's face, it was working.

"I can't believe that of all the _juvenile_—ugh." Hiccup rolled his eyes and purposefully ignored the giggles that were sure to make him regret his next decision; he already knew he was going to regret this. Nevertheless, he directed a confident glare to the Winter Guardian, grinning and self-assured that the gesture threw the Winter Spirit off-guard. "Well, Frosty—I guess it's time for me to show you what _I_ can do."

* * *

><p>*= Hiccup's room in *Dragons: Riders of Berk* is literally swamped with doodles of Toothless as well as some designs for his artificial tailfin. Hiccup really loves his dragon.<p>

*= _Natt Raseri_ - Night Fury in Norwegian (according to Google Translate). Edit: _Natt Skrekk_ Thank you, ****That other Guest**** for reading and taking the time to inform me of the translation, and if anyone here can offer a different or more correct translation, that'd be very helpful!

Okay—A Wild OC appears! Sorry. Don't worry though. She won't appear much. Oh, and just to reiterate, black thread means fate and red thread means love.

And as for Stoick's and Hiccup's exchange, I refuse to trust Google Translate for complete sentences. Plus, that's a lot of going back and forth from the dialogue and footnotes...

(Dear God, what have I done.)

11. Bricks and Breakthroughs

A great deal of gratitude goes to all you readers who keep this story thriving the way it is now. It's a pleasure to know that you enjoy what I love to do.

Just Call Me Endy and AncestorsEcho"well you know the drill: endless gratitude for all the advice and support you've given me, for the reassurance and critiques, and for being overall awesome. Also a big shout-out to Kat and Scorpion (you know who you are)! Thanks for saving my tail!

So, uhm, longer chapter too and sorry about the wait. Lots of things happen. Enjoy. Also...gah...Regionals this Saturday...wish me luck ;;

****Disclaimer: ****I own nothing but a laptop and certain plot elements.

* * *

><p>There remained something reminiscent about the act of hiking through the forest path. Numerous wisps of fleeting memories trailed off into evanescence like the puffs of exhalation on a frigid winter day until he found himself wading through a sea of cringe-worthy missteps and face-palming regrets; nostalgia swam through the afternoon air as anticipation budded and clenched with trepid tendrils amid internal chaos. Yet the simple act of placing one foot in front of the other took place again and again through the slush of snow and despite the berating voices in Hiccup's head at the head-shaking decision he made. The scenario was aptly familiar, the product of one's obstinate nature"hubris if anything else. Yes, it was all too familiar" |<p>

"Oh the Gods hate me" |" the teen groaned. Snowboard under his arm and Toothless at his heels, he made his trek uphill while lamenting of his fate. Not too far behind him were Jack"and the kids. "Some people get talked into skipping school or goaded into asking someone out"no, not me. I managed to get roped into making a spectacle of myself for the amusement of a horde of children and their leader"

"Oh would you quit complaining?" The Guardian flew overhead while ducking under a few branches. Jack grinned heartlessly at the sight of Hiccup's disgruntled expression. "You agreed to this after all."

Hiccup eyed him with weary exasperation. "a Winter Spirit with a Peter Pan complex." Behind him, Toothless glowered at said spirit.

Jack scoffed. "What does that make them? The Lost Boys?" _'And you, Wendy?'_ his brain traitorously added.

Hiccup sidestepped a large boulder protruding from the snow. "Yup. It fits."

Jack smirked. "I agree." '_Though you're a bit of John as well.' _The Spirit of Winter took a good look at Hiccup: all decked in his snowboarding gear and seeming to struggle under the weight of it all, Jack did feel a little bad; there was no way the kid would follow through. "You know, you could always back out," he offered. He frowned at the dry stare he received in return.

Hiccup sighed for what seemed to be the umpteenth time that day. "I know. I also know that I'm not going to." He resumed his pace, a little quicker, his back just a bit straighter.

Jack shook his head. '_Your funeralâ€|' _"A man of your word huh?"

"More like stubbornness issues," the teen retorted with a casual air.

The spirit smiled, slightly amused and slightly worried. "Probably gets you into a lot of trouble." He looked up to the hill's peak, looming in silence. He frowned as he spied trees scattered about the wintry terrain nearby where he hoped to form some slopes. He'd better help Hiccup stray away from them.

For Hiccup, he kept his gaze directed to the summitâ€"an easy enough course. He didn't quite know what Jack expected out of him with just a straight downwards path. Nonetheless, he shrugged. "Where I'm from, it's an occupational hazard."

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Hiccup stood awkwardly, strapped on to his board, overlooking the hill's zenith. He turned to the Winter Spirit, some several yards away at the side of the hill. "So, uh, how are we gonna do this?" he called.

Jack chuckled. "Well, you just do your thing and I'll take care of the rest." He covered his ears as the miniature entourage cheered and yelled for Hiccup in anticipation. "C'mon! Don't keep your fans waiting!"

The teen rolled his eyes before lapsing into silence. Taking his stance, he took a breath of the brisk morning air, cleansing his system before he put pressure onto his lead foot; it was slipping back into a familiar dance, an old song to sing, reliving a piece of the past, and soon he careened down through expanses of snow, jolting a bit as frozen ramps and snowy half-pipes erupted from the ground. He grinned and accepted the challenge, flying through ice and rime as he rode through winter.

Exhilaration: pure adrenaline rushed through his system. Dopamine thrummed through his vessels as innately as the wind's biting chill allowed him to taste freedom, absolute and pure from science and nature, from physics and winter's wonder. He vaguely noted the shrieks and shrill cries of others, afire with delight and excitement, but it was drowned by the blood pulsing through his veins and the tempo of life reverberating through the moment. With each

turn, from the tips of his toe-side to the heel-side, he allowed his body ride the frost-ridden ramps, miniature explosions of euphoria erupting from his mouth as he touched the air—the closest experience he'd ever had to flying. Skilled control and sharp turns steered him with grace and fluidity, effortlessly riding through each new obstacle that Jack decided to invent for his performance.

Meanwhile with Jack, it was only after a few heart-stopping moments did the spirit realize that Hiccup, the clumsy little fishbone, actually knew what he was doing. He swore he nearly dove after the boy each time his body twisted oddly and leant a little too forward or backward (like what he was doing right now—that little _showoff_). Still, the boarder remained balanced, enjoying the gentle little breaks of pure snow before Jack decided a little more action was needed to satisfy both of them—

—all of them, he means. Yes, _all_ of them. They were there for the kids' enjoyment as well.

He grinned as Hiccup went airborne again on a Jack-made half-pipe, not losing face even as the Winter Guardian deconstructed the snow beneath him to make another curve of ice for the boy to showcase his abilities on. Even as Hiccup seemed to wobble from the slight shock, Jack ignored it; he'd be safe. Besides, as much as he kind of hated to admit it—Hiccup can definitely handle himself.

Hiccup was probably little bit more than halfway down the hill. As he picked up momentum, he leaned forward and balanced his weight on his toes; after Jack's little stunt back there, maybe it was his turn to give the Guardian a scare. He raced down the hill, expertly shifting his weight and allowed gravity to work its magic. He laughed as he blazed past each little obstacle Jack created, using sharp and wide turns to throw off the Ice Spirit's game. As each ramp was created, the moment it was solid enough not to be crushed by Hiccup's ninety-plus pounds, he was again kissing the sky's eternal blue before he was welcomed by the forgiving earth (or more likely the little slope Jack clumsily put together out of panic.)

The Spirit gulped, watching warily as Hiccup once again got dangerously close to colliding with the ice he used for the ramp's foundation. He shook off the concern as he concentrated in creating more ramps before they ran out of incline. The kid was fast—okay, scratch that, he practically flew on snowy ground—but he was _Jack Frost—Harbinger of Winter, Guardian of Fun—

Jack almost had a heart attack as Hiccup jibbed down solid ice, board tilted precariously as Hiccup remained steady while gravity threatened to tip him over. Still, the boy remained calm and once back on the snow, began to race downhill. It was evident that catching up with him was growing steadily difficult, but Jack wasn't deterred.

He loved the chase.

If Hiccup went fast enough to where Jack couldn't design the course and obstacles for him, then he'd just have to anticipate the boy's moves so the little fishbone could really show the Guardian what he was made of. And it was in this unfortunate mindset that collided with Hiccup's own. The end-result was, upon a massive jump from

Hiccup from a previous incline, a steep ramp materialized beneath him. Without enough time to react, the teen landed roughly, eyes widening at the sight of frost attempting to accumulate beneath him as he sped downwards on solid ice.

For Jack, he gravely misjudged how much ice he could produce, especially at such a scale. His breath hitched as the gathering ice caught the base of Hiccup's board, lurching the boy forward painfully. The kids screamed in horror; thankfully, the brunet was secured by the straps.

Jack called to him, anxiety bleeding into his voice.
"Hiccup!"

"Uhâ€|Jack?" Hiccup gulped. "A little help here?" Well, he could honestly say he had never been caught in this situation before: stuck on a little slope made of ice...meters and meters above ground.

The Ice Spirit sighed; at least he was okay. "Right, uh, sorry about that! You were kinda going too fast!" He held in a snicker as Hiccup began to fidget under the discomfort.

"What?" Actually, Hiccup heard him the first time.

Jack sighed; it hurt to admitâ€" it really did. "I said you were going too fast!"

"What?" Hiccup repeated, fighting back a smirk.

The Guardian ground his teeth. "I said you were going tooâ€"wait a minuteâ€"you little shiâ€"

Hiccup tsk'd. "Language, Jack!" It did not help at all that the children began giggling behind the Winter Spirit. No, that little comment did not help Hiccup in his situation very much at all.

"You know what, get yourself down!" Yes it was juvenile; what was your point? Jack sent him a haughty look only to be a little put off a second later when he remembered that Hiccup couldn't see him. And even if he could, Hiccup was too far.

Hiccup sighed. "Oh c'mon!" It was seriously getting a little bit unnerving up there; he had no idea how long the ice would hold his weight.

Jack pretended to inspect and clean a nail while quietly assuring the kids that it was just a joke. "Nah, you can do it Mister Viking!" The kids burst in giggles and barks of laughter while Jack checked on Hiccup from the corner of his eye; the teen started to shake just a little bitâ€|

Out of rage. "Ugh, it's like talking to a block of iceâ€|" the brunet muttered underneath his breath.

Jack frowned. "What was that?" He heard 'ice' in there somewhereâ€|maybe he should get Hiccup before he actually took him seriously.

"Nothing!" Hiccup replied with a falsely sweet tone. He looked down, not finding the height very frightening; with some luck, he could

safely slide down the ramp if he could get free. It was the stability (or lack thereof) that had Hiccup worried. Well if Jack wasn't getting him, then he certainly wasn't going to wait for some Hail Mary pass of a savior to fetch him; he wasn't some ditzy dame. "Ugh, fine, I'll get down myself." He bent over to undo the straps, wobbling a bit as he regained freedom of his own two feet—his own two feet that never fared very well under slippery surfaces. He inched towards the edge of the board, careful to peek over to ramp—only to find that Jack had not finished it. He sighed. Of course. And of course, he misjudged the slipperiness of the slanted plane. "Wo-woah!"

"Hiccup!" Eyes open in shock, the Guardian raced to the teen as he slid closer and closer to the edge. His breath left him as the brunet screamed. The Winter Spirit hastened, mere feet away before the ice ended and the open air plummeted the teen down, down, down.

Jack honestly tried his best. He really did. But when a ninety-pound fifteen-year-old falls straight out of the sky, the possibility of said ninety pounds falling into his arms in a picturesque fashion was really all too farfetched. In his mind, maybe there was a slight hope that he'd catch Hiccup as a knight may rescue his damsel; sadly, no. Instead, the brunet crashed against him, hurling them out of control and flying off to a distance. Both teens collapsed into the snow-cushioned earth, the landing hailing a pained chorus as their limbs sprawled everywhere. It was a good thing that, technically, Jack didn't need to breathe.

But the good news was that at least Hiccup's head was lying on Jack's chest—

purely for the reason that he didn't crack his skull open that is. Yes, it really would be a shame if all of Jack's endeavors surmounted to naught. It had absolutely nothing to do with the fact that the other boy's weight and warmth was making Jack feel disgustingly (and a bit happily) woozy on the inside.

For Hiccup, his wooziness leaned towards the nauseatingly-dizzy sense as his vision fought to regain singularity. He gingerly lifted his head, semi-aware that Jack's arms were entrapping him once again in a strangely protective embrace. Looking straight forward, there were currently four familiar shadows in his sight right now— but something else captivated his attention altogether.

The Guardian flushed red at coming face-to-face with Hiccup staring directly at him. But there was no way his blush could rival Hiccup's: the brunet's cheeks were burning in that pretty shade of red that put even firelight's breathing embers to shame, mouth slightly agape as little puffs of breath escaped past lips pinked by the wintry atmosphere, and eyes focused solely on him, dazzling little orbs of viridian that exuded a brightness that blinded the Guardian from an emotion that its owner couldn't quite name. The wind picked up around them, sweeping dangling auburn locks from Hiccup's face; a snowflake or two kissed a freckled cheek but Hiccup didn't seem to mind it at all. Instead, the beginnings of a smile made its way to his lips; the small act set the Guardian's eyes alight with the knowledge that in the end, Hiccup probably had a lot of fun today—with him.

Jack was again quite relieved to know that Hiccup couldn't see what was probably an awe(love)struck look on his face. Even more so, he

found himself frozen (almost literally—it was definitely getting colder) from making that one little action that would connect their mouths — and would probably result in Hiccup's fist connecting to his face. He had enough sense to know what that kind of thing would lead to; he lacked enough of it, however, to stop himself from enjoying the view just a little bit longer...

Until a sickening crack broke through the amorous air followed by a thud and the harmonized shrieks of children.

It was Hiccup that fought to move first, but with his leg tangled around Jack's coupled with the fact that the Ice Spirit was attempting to sit up as well, all the unnecessary squirming and shifting only succeeded in tangling them further. It was rather difficult when one person had donned weighty snowboarding apparel and the other was only slightly visible to the one on top.

Jack grimaced as Hiccup's elbow came dangerously close to winging him in the nose. "Ow, Hiccup, move your—" "

"Wait—"hold on!" Hiccup tried shifting his weight to his knees. "Just lemme—" "

Jack inhaled sharply, resisting the urge to whimper; oh, the pain—"Ugh—"! That was my—" "

"Ah, geez, sorry! Was that really your—"?" Hiccup cringed.

"Yes! Yes it was!" the Guardian gasped, not liking at all how Hiccup seemed more keen on hiding his amusement than being actually sorry. Pushing himself off his back with a bit of help from the winter winds, Jack caused the pair doubled over, reversing positions due to Hiccup panicking and grabbing the Ice Spirit by the waist for balance.

Feeling thoroughly suffocated, Hiccup twisted and squirmed to get rid of the weight crushing his lungs and diaphragm. "Augh, get off!"

"That's what I've been trying to do!" Jack huffed, annoyed at the other's snappiness.

"Well, get on with it! You're heavier than I am!" the brunet wheezed.

Why was it that Jack couldn't go more than a few hours without Hiccup insulting him? "You little—"are you calling me—" "

"Uh—"guys?"

The pair turned and met the confused and slightly disturbed faces of the children and Toothless. The latter did not look all too pleased at the sight of the Ice-Child straddling his little human. Said human was also blushing profusely in mild horror and excess mortification as half of the children broke out in wide grins and giggles.

"Oooh, having fun guys?" Jamie teased.

The twins snickered. "You two wanna be alone?"

Pippa smiled. "Aw, how sweet!"

"He can do betterâ€|" Cupcake grumbled. Monty silently agreed.

Now thoroughly embarrassed, Hiccup rolled his eyes and refused to acknowledge how warm his cheeks became. "Haha, very funny guys. Now Jack, would you please get off of me?" He hoped his voice didn't sound too pleading.

Jack laughed nervously. "Can do." At least he could now since Hiccup stopped his fidgeting.

Scrambling to his feet once the Winter Spirit's weight was lifted from him, Hiccup examined each and every child with frantic eyes while doing a mental headcount. "Who screamed? Are you guys all right? What happened?" He knelt down to their level for a closer inspection, taking Sophie's arm and turning her this way and that. "Any broken-anything?"

"No, no! We're fine!" Pippa reassured, drawing the little girl back from the fretting babysitter.

"Can't say the same about your board thoughâ€|" Claude held up one half of the once whole snowboard, a jagged edge near the once-middle.

Caleb held the other half. "Sorry Hiccupâ€|"

It was difficult not to seem too crestfallen; it was the last board he made back at Gobber's shop before moving. He put on a sheepish smile. "Well, it's just a snowboard. I'm sure I'll get another." At least it could still be used as a memento. Standing up and brushing the snow off his pants, the brunet sighed. "So, what happened exactly?"

"We tried getting it down from the ice Jack made," Cupcake explained. It was hard to tell, but the girl was apologetic for its current condition.

"But for some weird reason, the ice started cracking!" Jamie continued.

Monty nodded. "Yeah the board went down and hit Jamie on the face!"

The Guardian's eyes widened. He bit his lip as a bubble of shame rose up to his chest, making the area ache. A wave of guilt flooded through his mind though he tried not to let it show. Sure it happened before, but he was a Guardian now. It was his responsibility to keep them safe and he let his emotions get the best of him. He was startled from his thoughts as Hiccup subtly gripped the sleeve of his Jacketâ€"an understanding. Releasing the material with one final brush of his hand, Hiccup said nothing more. He knew it wasn't Jack's fault.

Hiccup leaned down and examined the boy up close. "Well Jamie, are you okay?" There was a small bruise flowering on his skin, a splotch of purple. Hiccup winced; it would spread, he was sure of it.

Nonetheless, Jamie looked positively ecstatic. "Yeah! More than okay! Look!" He held out his gloved palm; the sight of the object resting on the polyester made the color drain from Hiccup's face.

"Oh no! A tooth!" He ignored Sophie's excited squeal at the sight of her brother'sâ€|rather bloody cuspid. In fact, he ignored everyone's look of anticipation and approval. '_Da, da-daâ€|I'm dead...'_

Jack snickered. "No Hiccup. Here, that's a good thing!"

Turning to the Guardian, Hiccup caught himself before berating Jack as to how losing a tooth could ever constitute as a 'good thing'. "Whaâ€|oh rightâ€|the Tooth Fairy."

Claude grinned. "Yeah! Tooth Fairy money!"

"Way to go, kiddo! For your sake, you'd have better been flossing. You know how Toothiana gets." The Winter Spirit smiled as Jamie nodded enthusiastically while the other kids gathered around to examine the rather impressive dental specimen; it even had a bit of his gums still stuck on it. Jack turned to the brunet, grin faltering at the sight of the other's disoriented expression. "Hiccup, you okay?"

Hiccup faked a smile. "Hm? I'm fine."_ 'Not sure how Jamie's mom'll take him losing a tooth under my watch thoughâ€|'_ When Jack turned towards the children again, Hiccup breathed out his anxieties. Toothless mewed in concern, black tail whisking back and forth as the Norwegian Forest butted his head against Hiccup's leg. Bending down to carry the feline in his arms, Hiccup cast his gaze skyward; it was getting a bit late in the afternoon. "We should probably get goingâ€|and Jamie, we'll need to take care of that tooth and your bruise when we get to your house."

His suggestion was well-received: "Okay!", "I'll carry the snowboard!", "I'll carry the other half!", "I'm hungry!", "Starving!", "Let's get food!", "Yeah!"

The teen chuckled. "All right, all right. Let's see what I can cook up when we get there." And so began the long journey home. Heading down the trail with a train of children and one immortal following after himâ€|it did uphold some Peter Pan-esque qualities. Not that Hiccup would bring that up again.

Behind him, the Winter Spirit noted that Hiccup had yet to eat anything today. "You should really get some lunch too, Hiccup. Then maybe you wouldn't be so much of a fishbone." He grinned as Hiccup harrumphed and walked a little bit faster to get some distance between them.

"Oh haha, very funnyâ€|" the teen drawled. Jack frowned as the cat comfortably curled up in Hiccup's arms seemed to glare at him over the brunet's shoulder. He gladly returned it before taking the hint; the little demon and Hiccup might want to be alone for a bit. Hiccup did seem to have an awful lot on his mindâ€|must've been queasy from the sight of Jamie's tooth. He joined with the children's cheerful conversations and carried Sophie when she got tired from walking. The air was alight with peals of laughter and nonsense that carried off woes and worries far beyond the treetops, away from the pure white of

falling frost and the stillness of the wild.

But as they trekked back where soil and snow became sleet and pavement, to busy streets polluted with the bustle of life and throngs of restless souls flowing with the currents of secular affairs, the quiet brunet thought back to the illusory and incredible, an afternoon of gliding through snow and speeding with the winds "and to the one strange moment of what might've been magic.

And maybe it was from the fall and maybe it was because he didn't even have anything to eat that morning and maybe it was just a little bit of wishful thinking (on both their parts)"but this time Hiccup was pretty sure that when he had looked at that shadowy face"

He caught a brilliant glimmer of ice blue that mirrored his own wonder.

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Jack rested his weight on his staff as the Bennett siblings settled down for bed; bedtime was always an interesting affair in the small household. He gave a baffled smile at Sophie's strange fascination with her older brother's tooth considering her aversion to loose teeth in the past; that or maybe she wanted a visit from the Tooth Fairy as well. He turned to Jamie with a grin. "So, you excited to see the Tooth Fairy again?"

Jamie returned a wide smile, revealing a gap in between the upper half of his neat row of teeth. "Yeah! It's been forever since I last saw her." He placed the cuspid beneath his pillow, shaking his head as Sophie whined to see it once more.

"Don't worry, Soph. You'll be losing your baby teeth soon enough." The little girl giggled and she tested each little tooth for any sign of loosening. To Jamie, he resumed the conversation. "Brushed your teeth?"

The boy nodded eagerly. "Yup! I made sure to floss extra too! I can't wait for her to come; mom even let Sophie sleep here tonight so we can see the Tooth Fairy together!"

The Ice Spirit chuckled. "Bet Toothiana or Baby Tooth'll be thrilled." The excited atmosphere dimmed when Jamie poked his tongue through the gap where the tooth once resided. Jack cleared his throat uneasily. "So, uh"you're okay right?"

Jamie nodded vigorously once more. "Yeah! I mean, this kind of thing happened before so it's nothing to worry about. My mom didn't even blame Hiccup for it!"

It was a bit of a relief to hear that the babysitter wasn't convicted for crime (perhaps future incarceration when his dad found out, maybe), but it didn't do much for the spirit's conscience. "Yeah, but back then, I"I mean I managed to keep you safe, right?" He paused. "Well"most of you." In truth, he did feel a little bit responsible for the sofa incident"but it could've been a lot worse without his help!

(He tried not to focus on the fact that it was his fault Jamie sled

through town in the first place.)

The nine-year-old settled underneath the covers while Sophie dug around under his pillow for the tooth again. When he resurfaced, he flashed the Winter Spirit a placating smile. "And just like before, I'm _okay_."

"Iâ€"all right, that's good to hear." Still partially unconvinced, Jack eyed the small bruise forming on Jamie's face. Though luckily Hiccup had been able to treat it when they got to Jamie's house, the mark left him feeling a bit discomfited.

Seeing that the Guardian's thoughts were elsewhere, Jamie himself thought back to events earlier that day. With a perplexed look, he rubbed his chin. "So, what happened out there?"

Jack turned his attention back to the boy. "Hm? Whadya mean?"

The boy snickered. "You know, when youâ€"

No more explanation was required. "_That_," Jack defended, "was an accident."

"Mhmâ€|" Was the Winter Spirit detecting a hint of _sassiness_ in his tone? Perhaps Hiccup was a bad influence on the kidâ€|

"And I really hope you didn't think anything else happened," the Guardian declared.

Jamie shook his head as Sophie gave a secretive little giggle. "I know, Jack, I know." He tickled his little sister, making her squeal and release the tooth from her hand. He snatched it and buried it deeper into his pillow this time.

Jack watched the display with a bemused smile at the unique exchange. "Good."

It was peaceful for a moment before Jamie decided to open a can of worms: "But you still like him."

"Iâ€"ughâ€|" Jack swiveled around, hoping that Jamie didn't catch the pink dusting on his cheeks. He knew nothing good came out of refuting the claim, so he didn't. That didn't mean that he was any happier about taking the verbal torment.

"You should tell him," the nine-year-old advised; Sophie concurred with something a noise that sounded like a, "Yah!"

Jack's face fell, feeling doubly betrayed. "What?" Great, now _two_ were ganging up on him?

"Yeah! C'mon, Hiccup's a great guy!" The Guardian cringed; both siblings were practically beaming with anticipation and animation in their eyes while asking him to commit an act more difficult than swallowing needles. They, however, were looking at him like Christmas was coming twice this year.

Still, it helped to know that someone was on his sideâ€| Jack sighed. "I know that butâ€"

"And it'll be so cool to have you two together!" Jamie looked to his sister for encouragement; she concurred with an enthusiastic nod, bouncing on the mattress in giddiness.

Jack ran his fingers through his hair. "Jamie, do you even know the first thing about _dating?_" He was glad the desperation didn't seep through. '_Because I don't! Really, I'll gladly take any advice at this pointâ€'with the exception of confessing.'_

Jamie ignored him. "And from what his dad says, he's single!"

Jack heaved a heavy sigh. "It's not that simâ€'" He halted, backtracking. "Single, you say?"

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Dinner was a silent affair; it usually was. During long days, his father wasn't really up for talking. In fact, he often dozed off every few minutes if it got a little too quiet. But as the large man started moving about in cleaning up the dishes, a bit of conversation sparked between the two to break the bleak monotony.

"So son, how was your day?" Stoick passed a plate for Hiccup to put away into one of the cupboards.

Drying the dish carefully, Hiccup leaned over the counter to place it among the number of others. Back to his father, he concealed his wary expression. _"Pretty good. Jamie lost a baby tooth while he was playing, but he didn't mind. His mom didn't either."_ He held his breath for the coming reaction.

"Is that so?" Hiccup sighed in relief at the neutral tone of intrigue in his father's voice; at least he wasn't blamed.

Grabbing another wet dish from his father, Hiccup proceeded to wipe it down before storing it away for another meal. _"Yeah. Tooth Fairy and all."_

"Hah. Tooth Fairy." The laughter that left his father rumbled unpleasantly through the quiet atmosphere. _"I wonder when she'll let the boy grow up."_ He passed a glass to his son.

Hiccup hesitated before taking it from his father's grip. _"I'm not sure, but it's good for him to enjoy his childhood."_ Unwillingly, his thoughts traveled back to memories best left forgotten. He shook his head. No, not now; not when he found somethingâ€'"someoneâ€'" that proved it all wrong.

Soaping the last bit of silverware in the sink, Stoick watched the grime fall away, leaving the utensils dull and scratched from his vigorous cleaning. _"Yes, but it's important for him to move on from such nonsense."_ He handed them to the teen.

Hiccup stowed them away, thinking of how quickly the once gleaming metal lost its luster. _"Rightâ€'|"_

"I mean, with youâ€'|" The large Norwegian turned to gesture to his son before pausing. He knew it was never a time to bring _that_ back up again. _"Ah, it's a rite of passage. Everyone deserves to know the truth of how this world truly runs."_ He stroked his beard, partly

out of pondering, mostly out of discomfort. "Magic's nice and all, but when you start filling your head with these foolish ideas, you run the risk of losing yourself in a fantasy while real life just passes you by." He looked to his son, the lanky little fishbone of his own flesh and blood, and smiled when he saw the tiny brunet look him in the eye and nod his head.

It was difficult keeping his face impartial and his tone agreeing. "I know, dad." Hiccup fought the urge to reject what his father said, the very notion that nothing in the world was worth believing in, but the words were locked behind his lips out of fear. Fear of making his dad worry, fear of making himself sound crazy—fear of being crazy.

"I know you do, son." Wiping his dripping fingers with a paper towel and disposing of it, Hiccup's father stretched the tiredness out from his system. "Now, brush your teeth then it's off to bed with you. School's starting pretty soon after that 'blizzard' as the people here call it." He chuckled at the very thought; winters at Berk would really give these people something to panic about.

A little thankful for the conclusion of their rather tense talk, Hiccup headed to upstairs right away. "'kay. Good night, dad."

Stoick hummed in acknowledgment. "Good night, son. Oh—and Hikke?"

Hiccup's head peeked out from the banister. "Yeah?"

"You should think twice about snowboarding around these parts." Hiccup visibly and drastically paled. "You should also know that nothing happens around here without me hearing about it, especially when it involves you." All the while, his father kept a nonchalant tone. Hiccup wasn't fooled; he was never off the hook.

Sighing, Hiccup accepted his fate. "Right—sorry."

"Good, and Hikke? You're what they call—" The man mocked a gesture of contemplation before snapping his fingers in 'Aha!' " 'Grounder'." As Hiccup groaned, the teen swore he saw a sliver of a smirk on his dad's lips, obscured by the red forest of a beard on his face.

Defeated, Hiccup trudged up the stairs. "Of course I am."

—.

Departing from the bathroom, dressed for bed and his mind still buzzing from the day's events, Hiccup frowned as a cool gust of wind greeted him as he opened his dark bedroom door; had this truly been a horror movie, Hiccup was pretty sure he'd be the first victim and this would be his final scene alive. "Jack, I know you're there." He sighed and closed the door, eliciting a startled meow from Toothless who had been crouching over menacingly before a seemingly empty spot in the corner of the room.

The Ice Spirit's laughter bounced off the dark walls, eerily echoing in the dim, enclosed space. "Aw, how?"

Moving about to find the switch, Hiccup blinked as a quick flash of light consumed his bedroom. "A: It's pretty cold in here. B: For a spirit, your breathing is kinda noisy. And C: Toothless was hissing at something in the dark." He sighed as he spotted a shadow sitting rather innocently in the middle of his bed. '_Another impromptu sleepover, I'm guessing?_'

Jack stretched himself languidly on the covers. "You must think you're pretty darn observant, don't you." The mattress must've been new from when Hiccup moved here; it had yet to be broken in properly. He was startled as Toothless hopped on to the foot of the bed. The feline gave him one last warning look before curling up in a ball, facing away from him.

Hiccup snickered as he turned on the bedside lamp. "Faster than you on ice too, if today proved anything." The lights were out once more with only the dull orange glow providing refuge from night. He took his place at the opposite side of the bed, smirking expectantly at his shadowy companion.

Rolling his eyes, the Guardian sat up, none-too-pleased. "Aughâ€"okay fine. I admit it Hiccup, you're pretty awesome at snowboarding. And you do not have the grace of a beached walrus."

The teen gave him a mock-bow. "Why thank you, Jack Frost."

"Yeah, yeah." The Guardian smirked as he settled himself under the covers. "So, heard you got grounded for it. Well, at least I think I heard the word 'grounded' in there." His father spoke surprisingly good English from the few sparse words he heard float upstairs to where he waitedâ€"not thatâ€"Jack was _waiting_ for Hiccup like some puppyâ€"or somethingâ€"

He scoffed. "No thanks to you."

Jack leaned over to the brunet, allowing his mirth to be heard through his voice. "Hey, how was it my fault that you get talked into things too easily?"

"It'sâ€"Iâ€"ugh." It was getting pretty difficult in controlling the amount of annoyance in his tone. Hiccup hmph'd and turned away, drawing the blanket towards himself in retaliation. "You're right. I guess I should ignore you from now on."

"What? Aw, c'mon don't be like that!" Jack would like to say that there was more laughter in his voice than actual panic; he would also like to say that there was a lot less whining as well. At least, he'd _like_ to say so.

Hiccup rolled his eyes as Jack started shaking his shoulder. "All right, fine. You still owe me that explanation though." Batting the spirit's hands away, Hiccup rolled over on his back, simply staring at the ceiling.

Jack tried his best to sound bewildered. "Explanation?"

"Remember your _bet_?" Hiccup closed his eyes and willed his irritation away; it would not bode well for him and for Jack for his father to suddenly burst through the doors at the slightest

indication of a ruckus. "Why you came into my room last night?" '_And why you're here again? '_

"Because youâ€|opened the window?" This was the second time the Guardian had seen Hiccup almost bristle.

"Jackâ€|" That sounded like a warning growl too; maybe it was Hiccup that took after Toothless?

The thought had the Ice Spirit chuckling. "Okay, okayâ€|I dunnoâ€|I justâ€|did." He scratched his head, abashed. "We had a lot of fun and I kinda didn't want that to end just yet." As he spoke, his voice drifted off, a little self-conscious, a little awkward, and a little unsureâ€|of what he meant and how Hiccup would interpret it.

Hiccup blinked. "Oh. That's it?"

The laughter that left the Guardian's lips sounded hollow and off and had Hiccup been able to see him, he would've noted that the easy smile on his face didn't make his eyes light up the way they usually do when it was genuine. "Yeah. What other reason could there be?" '_Except for another reasonâ€|that I can't tell you.' _

The brunet shrugged. "I don't know; that's why I asked." Hiccup moved to turn off the light, but stopped as the Ice Spirit continued.

"Andâ€|maybe because I was a bit scaredâ€|" Jack would strangle himself later for revealing this to him, but right now, there was no way he could dispel the bizarre tension between them if he didn't come clean about everything.

(Well, almost everything.)

"What?" The teen turned towards him, puzzled and curious.

The Winter Spirit bit his lip but relented; it was already too late to take back what he said anyways. "Okay, you won the bet fair and square, so I'll be straight with you." '_Well, as "straight" as this is going to get at leastâ€|' _He sighed and continued on to say, "I still wonder if you knowâ€|you'll ever get to really see me."

Beside him, Hiccup studied his words, seeking something more behind what was merely said, scouring beyond the imperfect implications. Whether he found something or not, the teen simply replied, "That'sâ€|really important to you, isn't it?"

"To be seen?" '_By you?' _ A shade of pink tinged the Guardian's cheeks. "Yeah."

"I can understand that." And then Hiccup thought back to wind, ice, and snow, to falling and colliding, to pain and protection, to eyes of blue and then nothing more. "Well, I wouldn't worry about it right now. We just met a few days ago." A few days? Was that all it took for such a drastic revolution in his reality?

"Yeah, butâ€|Hiccup?" Jack was definitely going to regret thisâ€|

"Hm?" Jack suppressed another nervous bout as Hiccup fully faced

him.

"Who am I to you? Heyâ€"don't laugh! This is a serious question!" Honestly, from the moment the other's lips quirked to a quick smile, Jack knew that getting a straight answer from the little fishbone would take a bit of work.

"Well that's new." Hiccup didn't have to see it to know that Jack was currently scowling (pouting) at him. "Kidding, kidding." But that was a pretty intriguing questionâ€"so Hiccup supposed he'd have fun with it. He counted off one finger: the index. "Well, to me I guess you're the creepy guy that stalked me in the showerâ€" "

Jack reddened, mortified. "I told you that was an accident!"

"â€"the careless prankster that pelted me with snowballsâ€" " The middle finger.

"You left yourself open," he attempted to rationalize.

"â€"the brash dolt that dragged me through snow and sleet â€" " The ring finger.

"Again, it was not that bad."

"â€"and the reckless idiot that gave me some pretty interesting injuries from that crash-landing today." The pinkie.

Jack cringed. "â€"really?"

The teen shrugged and decided to take an old friend's philosophy on it. "Yeahâ€"but don't worry. It's only fun if you get a scar out of it."

The Winter Spirit nodded, a little dismayed to by the information given to him. "Ohâ€"uh, so isâ€" "

"You're impatient too," Hiccup interjected.

"Thank you, really," he returned drily.

The brunet was smiling now, seemingly pleased that he had knocked the spirit down a few pegs; he might as well throw the guy a bone. "You'reâ€"also a really fun guy, surprisingly innocent despite your demeanor that some might label as mischievous, really love kids, and it's important for you that everyone has a good time." Hiccup flushed a little before continuing, hoping that the weak lamplight wouldn't give him away. "You're also surprisingly honest and strangely kind when you want to be. You love making people smile and though you like to cause trouble, you don't mean any harm. You crave attention and hate being ignored because you've been through enough of that your entire life. You're afraid of screwing up because others might get hurt. Andâ€"you're probably really uncomfortable with all that I just said right now, huh?" Because Valhalla knows Hiccup was.

Jack shook his head, affection evident in his eyes. "You must think you're pretty darn observant, don't you." He was afraid some of it leaked down into his words; ah, no matter. "But you know, you really didn't answer my question."

"Huh?" Their gazes met again and Jack was somewhat delighted to know that the brunet's words didn't just affect him; nothing on earth could hide such an adorably blatant blush.

"You told me things about myself that I already knew. Now, tell me something that can only be told from your perspective." He leaned towards him again, unconscious of the shrinking distance between them. "Who am I to you?"

"You'reâ€¦" Hiccup paused, eyes darting away before straying back to the shadowed being before him. "A reason to believe again," he breathed. Suddenly aware of what he said, he struggled to backpedal and explain properly. "Iâ€¦" "I dunno. I guess. Just knowing that you're here, that you existâ€¦it changes things. No, it changes everything. It's terrifying to think so, but it's lifting at the same time. Everything I was taught was wrong and everything that I hoped is real. That nothing's really impossible now and that faith actually does have a solid foundation to build on. Soâ€¦I guess I owe you my thanks." His face was red again; the same color of red that reached the tips of his ears down to his neck and made every freckle almost disappear in the wake of its vibrant shade. "Thank you, Jack Frost. In truth, maybe the world we're shown isn't so bad after all." But the red covering his cheeks didn't stop the wan smile on his face, nor the truth in his sentiments.

And Jack loved that blush. "You're welcome." He chuckled breathlessly with the knowledge that he was probably redder than Hiccup. "I guess I wasn't what you really expected then, am I?"

"Nope. I'm not too disappointed though." Hiccup laughed as Jack gently whacked him with a pillow.

When sleep lulled the teen to night's embrace, the Guardian lay awake; lost in half-reveries and private musings; blind beads of thought collided and strung together: a snake devouring its tail. Connecting the worrying cycle is the shared object of Jack's affections, having taken permanent residence in the Guardian's mind. It was disconcerting to know that, while trapped in a stalemate by certain barriers, there still persisted this sprouting glimmer of hope, pushing through frigid doubts and icy realities; it was a tiny bud that enclosed fragile wishes and muted desperation, tiny and strong, rising and thriving.

But it was still a little crazy.

The guy had positive feelings about him and was starting to recognize him separately from J  nkul Frosti; that was all Jack knew. Attraction was a long shot. And if he even had an inkling of those sentiments towards the Guardian, wouldn't he have been a lot more concerned about sharing his room    sharing his _bed_    with the Ice Spirit? Jack groaned and flung an arm over his eyes in an attempt to quell the little train-wrecks that dotted the railways of his thoughts. The other arm lay adjacent to his head, fingers clenching as though trying to grasp an imaginary answer, a net trying to catch the wind.

Maybe it was chance, maybe it was that bastard Fate, but just for tonight, maybe the world was trying to send the spirit a sign as Hiccup rolled _towards_ him. The teen's arm, having previously been used to elevate his sunken pillow, now rested on the opposite

cushionâ€|with his hand laying on Jack's. His fingers curled against the Guardian's, vulnerable, innocent, and endearing as the brunet slept blissfully on under the shroud of sweet oblivion. His face was at peace tonight, unmarred by exhaustion, undisrupted and void of cinematic illusions that danced behind eyelids.

And maybe dreams weren't neededâ€"not for now.

Not when whatever was happening between them was still too young and still too frail to be tainted by worries and labels. For now, it was what it was. Futures were built with the actions of "now," brick by boring brick. And whether it would build ruin or a bridge between them, Jack supposed he was lucky enough to just have this chance.

Jack turned towards the sleeping teen, careful not to wake the other with his movements. Between empty sheets and a breath's distance away, Jack closed his fingers around the other's hand and shut his eyes. Tomorrow would be another chance to keep moving forward as the future unfolds. His final thought of the night brought a grin to Jack's face.

He wondered how Hiccup would react to finding them holding hands in the morning.

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It perhaps occurred when Jamie's eyes began drooping or when his sister's light breaths started to lull him with its repetitive cadence, but it was probably with those first flickers of Dreams and that danced strange and vivid fantasies through his mind that jolted him awake. He blinked the images (of the Easter Bunny riding on a sleigh with a sack full of toys thrown over his shoulder and Santa in fairy wings collecting teeth) out of his brain. Sure it would've been really cool if they could trade jobs for a bit, but he guessed it was for the best if they stuck with what they knew.

When his eyes adjusted to the darkness of the room, he also guessed that it would've been a bit more terrifying to find a colorfully-feathered woman hovering over his bed with a surprised face.

But that didn't faze Jamie Bennett at all. "Tooth Fairy!" With a great show of exuberance, the boy nearly jumped out of bed to greet her. He turned to his sister and began shaking her shoulder. "Sophie, Sophie wake up! It's the Tooth Fairy!" The girl only whined in return before resuming her unresponsive state.

"Oh hello Jamie!" Toothiana gave him a pleasant wave. "No need to wake your sister; she's a growing girl and needs her sleep." She gave an affectionate look to the child upon seeing the little blonde grin and murmur amid her slumber.

Jamie smiled apologetically. "Right, sorry. She just wanted to see you again."

Toothiana clapped her hands in delight, her wings fluttering excitedly. "Aw, that's so sweet! I'm glad to see you both, but from what I can see, she's enjoying her dreams right nowâ€|." She gestured to the little grains of Sandy's creation, gliding in whirls above

Sophie's head; airy wisps of clouds, cats, and snowflakes waltzed in fluidity as a giggle escaped past the young girl's lips.

Jamie chuckled, taking a guess as to where those dreams might've come from. "Yeah, you're probably right." He turned and grabbed for the tooth beneath the pillow, frowning when he found it gone.

"You're sister's a sneaky one," Toothiana giggled. In her hand, she held the tooth to the moonlight for closer inspection. "Found it under her pillow! They're so cute at that age," she cooed.

Jamie rolled his eyes but agreed nonetheless; Sophie sure was getting adventurous.

"So tonight we have an upper cuspid I see! Oh, you flossed! I'm so proud!" She flitted about, dazzled by the little dental marvel.

"Thanks!" Jamie grinned, revealing the small gap between rows of white. "But you can thank Jack for this one."

The Tooth Fairy giggled. "Again? Well, as long as you're okayâ€¦"

Jamie nodded, enthusiasm threatening to burst. "Yeah! It was actually really awesome! It happened when my new babysitter was snowboarding down the hill but he was too fast for Jack to make the ice-ramps in time so heâ€¦"

"Waitâ€¦babysitter?" Toothiana frowned. She hoped Jack wasn't messing around with adults again.

"Oh yeah! My new babysitter can see Jack! Isn't it great?" Jamie was practically bouncing on the mattress, beaming with joy. "He just moved in last week and met Jack a few days ago and they're already really good friends!"

Toothiana's expression, however, juxtaposed with the boy's emotion. "Babysitterâ€¦ wait, Jamieâ€¦how old is your babysitter?" The confusion was evident in her face but slight panic rising to her heart was a different matter.

The boy hummed as he thought back; his mom introduced his new neighbor as a teenager and he wasâ€¦"Oh, he's likeâ€¦fifteen?" Jamie scratched his head; yes, that sounded about right.

"_Fif_â€¦," The Tooth Fairy squeaked before clearing her throat and composing herself. "And you're positive he can see Jack?" Her wings were nearly vibrating the air particles about her as her hands fidgeted nervously; this was serious, this was definitely not good.

"Well, yeah! I mean, you can ask Jack yourself." He pointed to the window, a quiet winter night devoid of blustery gales and harrowing howls of the wind. "He's over at Hiccup's right now!"

Toothiana raised a brow, face revealing blatant confusion. "Heâ€¦is?"

"Yeah." Jamie bit his lips, stifling a laugh. He cupped a hand over

his mouth before whispering, "Between you and me, I think Jack likes him. But, uhm, if he asks, I didn't say anything." He looked around, wary of any telltale signs of the Harbinger of Winter.

Under the guise of night and the pallor of moonbeams, the color that drained from the fairy's face went unheeded. She swallowed back a fit of dread that threatened to sink into her system, nearly overriding reason and logic. "O-oh right, of course Jamie! Don't worryâ€"not a word! Haha, oh Jackâ€"that's certainly something!" Her laughter quivered off-key, the tone anxious and unpleasant. "Well, uhm, I'll be off now! Lots of teeth to collect and all!" She gave Jamie a smile, strained with worry and the feather-weight of a white lie, pearly and crooked like the memories she adored.

Jamie hesitated before giving her a wave of goodbye. "Okay, bye Tooth Fairy!" Whether the boy recognized the beginning of a problem or whether he rationally assumed that another dental-related emergency needed the Tooth Fairy's presence at that moment, he settled down to bed without qualms or outright suspicion as the lady in vibrant plumes flew to the window.

Toothiana veiled her troubles with a smile, making sure it was genuine enough before turning to Jamie. "Good bye! Remember to brush and floss! Oh, and the money's under Sophie's bed!"

Baffled by the sudden about-face, Jamie scratched his head as the Guardian of Memories fled his room and flew into the night. "Allâ€"right?"

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Toothiana zipped through the brisk air, all too soon finding herself before the house once occupied by Edith Greene, a girl whose gumball addiction made Baby Tooth as well as a few of her other fairies frequent fliers to the Greene household a few years back. If Toothiana's calculations were correct, Edith would be nineteen nowâ€"a college student; her parents probably settled down to more affordable accommodations to support their child. *

But the new resident of this houseâ€"Toothiana shook her head. Fairies often lost track of children until the next loose tooth.

There was still a slight possibility that perhaps the boy was younger than Jamie had speculated; after all, it was more or less a guesstimation on the nine-year-old's behalf. The same went for Jack's seeming "like" of this boy. There was still a chance that there was absolutely nothing to fret over. Besides, what did that word mean anyways? 'Like.' She began her ascent to the bedroom facing the solemn streetâ€"Edith's old bedroom.

Toothiana shivered as a conversation between her and a certain woman crossed her mind. "Did you know that I love puppy love the best? Because even though you know that once what they shared has been tainted with the trials and tribulations that come with being in this sickening thing people call a 'relationship', that feelingâ€"that wonderful feeling of being completely immersed in love when you know your 'I like you' is reciprocatedâ€"I get to know that even though it was brief, even though it was fleeting, it existed. For that time and place, those two hearts beat as oneâ€"and it's the most beautiful

thing you can possibly imagine."_

Cupid had said that one day, a short visit she took out of courtesy (she met all the Guardians, save Jack, at one point); they had never met before until then. The older woman said that as she took a fairy's collected toothâ€”the memory from Aaron Bazan, then an elementary student who gained his first love and lost his lower canine. But from the vast amount of memoirs that Toothiana collected, she willed that particular talk away; it was best not to jump to conclusions.

It all turned to dust as her eyes widened and mouth parted in a silent gasp as she absorbed the scene through the window.

It was difficult to tell through the glass, but there was no mistaking that familiar head of snow-white, wildly windswept hair beneath those sheets. There was also no mistaking that there was an unfamiliar figure lying beside her fellow Guardian, both cuddled awfully close to one another. At leastâ€”that's what it seemed from here. With Jack's back to Toothiana, it was difficult to tell. She adjusted her angle as her wings flittered madly, craning her neck to read the entirety of the situation.

The sight had Toothiana taken aback in shock. There was truly no mistaking it, not with the way the _teenager _had his hand on Jack's, not with the look of absolute contentment the Guardian of Winter had in his smile, not with the intimate atmosphere that enveloped them, not with the words that echoed in Toothiana's ears from an ancient cynic: "_I love puppy love bestâ€”because it starts with that 'I like you,' and there blossoms a chance that this 'like' turns into the 'love' that most people end up searching for and dreaming about their entire livesâ€”"_

The fairy floundered, dazed on what to do before darting off to the sky, adrenaline and panic rushing through her wings as the cool night air numbed her of initial terror. Still, that didn't stop her or her brain from acknowledging the gravity of the situation at hand. The Guardian of Memories sped through the night, northward and to the other Guardians as an inner mantra echoed in crescendo within her mind.

'_This is badâ€”this is really, really bad!'_

* * *

><p>*= Jamie and Sophie's neighborhood isn't a rich one. Hiccup was volunteered (by Stoick) to babysit Jamie and Sophie, so he does it for free. I suppose I should put in a flashback or something of how Jamie, Sophie, and Hiccup met. Oh and the name Edith Greene and Aaron Bazan just popped into my head for some reason.

Don't worry Jack, Hiccup's getting thereâ€”(maybe) and uh, soâ€”did I ever say how much I _love_ How to Train Your Dragon? (Sorry for all the references.) And geez, I think I made it look like Jack was just caught sleeping around with his mistre(ss). Uhmâ€”no FrostBite or RainbowSnowcone or another name I can't think of, though. This little panic session will be explained later on the next chapter.

The entire snowboarding scene was derived from my crappy imagination, a lot of instructions from various websites, a video of Hiccup

snowboarding, and some great advice from AncestorsEcho. Even with all the help, I apologize.

Brick by Boring Brick " a song by Paramore. Pretty much parallels with a major theme in the story.

(You can try to guess what part of Jack Hiccup accidentally brought pain to.)

12. Scorpions and Smut: A Special

So, this isn't really the next chapter. Sorry.

Scorpion, let me just tell you that I regret promising this. But whatever, you're a good friend (when you want to be) so here's the smut for you. Kat, if you're reading this, yes I am in the dark side with your sister (probably deeper in the abyss actually). Oh and Endy, I'm used that idea of yours, but probably not in the way you thought I would, so I am deeply sorry. Thanks for being awesome and reading through this.

And to everyone else who will/has read this, I must apologize.

****Rated M****:** **Uhm, so yeah. It has been a while so I hope I'm not too rustyâ€|Don't take anything I wrote here seriously in the actual scheme of the story. Honestly, please don't. And I must say I am mortified and I regret everything right now. But I'm doing this anyways because my head is all fuzzy from being sick.

****Warning****:** PWP (wellâ€|almost), Lemon, vulgarity, and bad jokes ahoy. Also slight OOCâ€|because I wouldn't know how each character would react in this situation. Slight crack for Hiccup's sassiness.**

****Disclaimer:** **I own nothing but a laptop and certain plot elements.

(By the way, 4TH PLACE IN REGIONALS. HELL YEAH, GOING TO AUSTIN FOR STATE. As an alternate, but still! Thanks for all the support guys!)

* * *

><p>WARNING: Sorta-kinda deviates from current storyline; this is just an extra for those **who want it.**

A soft sigh fell from Cupid's lips, the very sound lost amongst the scuttling masses of her spiders as they threaded and wove destiny, lust, and ardor. Held cautiously between her thumb and index finger was a single piece of thread belonging to one Hamish Haddock the Third. It was a pale, fragile little sliver of translucent pink, nearly invisible to the naked eye. From across the way, farther and farther towards the other recipient, the silk glittered under a faint light against the stale pallets of frequent falsities; it was scarlet from the other end, bright and radiating with the honesty of the heart's emotion. Red, a color of passion that blossoms with the frenzy of adoration, a color of courage that does not dim against tumult, a piercing color that penetrates doubt and fear, a color

ofâ€

'_Marriage*,' _she mused before shaking her head. Too early. The boy was only fifteen for heaven's sake. "Butâ€|" she hummed as she walked back towards the other recipient, the Guardian of Winter, using the thin strand connecting them as a guide. The woman halted after some time, watching where Haddock's faint pink met Frost's flaming red.

She stooped down to examine the sharp contrast of hues. One color didn't bleed into the other's territory but remained fixed and separate, only sharing the thread and nothing more.

"Hmâ€|what to do with you," she murmured, eyes directed at the fairer tint. It was not only troubling that an immortal had fallen in love with a human adolescent with an expiration date, but his feelings were also not (yet) reciprocated?_ 'Quite a dilemma indeed.' _A spider dangled from a nearby portrait, four pairs of eyes from its single head looking towards her with befuddlement. She reached out and petted one of her most trusted creatures while ideas began to surface. She could alwaysâ€|

The arachnid squeaked, not liking the lewd grin that crept on his Mistress's face. Scurrying to Cupid's shoulder, he chirped frantically. Had anyone else been able to interpret his cries, it would have gone something along the lines of, "No! You know meddling is bad! Very bad! Bad Mistress! This can only end in tears!"

"Oh hush, Bartok*," Cupid chided. She soothed her little creature while she beckoned another spider to come forward. "Darling, I need you to get me that vialâ€|noâ€|waiâ€"yesâ€|yes, I mean the red oneâ€"no, the _other_ red one." The creature paused in his trills, eight eyes wide open in horror at the request. The woman sighed. "Yes, just please get me the red powder. I know what I'm doing; it's not like this generation hasn't been exposed to much worse," she added darkly. Bartok, atop her shoulder, shook his head as his brother reluctantly scuttled off through mazes and mazes of webs.

Not ten seconds later, a bottle suspended by silk dropped to Cupid's side. The woman took the glass, musing over the rich, vibrant shade of crimson that gleamed in wickedness and allure. Bartok squeaked as Cupid pulled out the cork and poured the swirling grains of red into her palm.

With one final smirk, she blew a kiss of poisons and roses in one lust-shaded cloud that tainted the quivering strand of pink.

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When the teen first awoke, a series of observations were made, each note taken in higher gravity than the previous. First, a part of Hiccup was mildly concerned as to why he couldn't see anything. Second, another part of him was startled as to why he couldn't move his limbs.* Third and mostly, however, he was freaking the fuck out as to why he was naked.

"Oh, this isn't normalâ€"I can't see, I can't moveâ€" oh Gods this isn't normal, ohgodsohgodsohgodsoh!" The mantra, of course, wasn't doing much good. In fact, writhing blindly against invisible holds

only proved quite futile. Plus, the feel of surprisingly soft sheets on his bare skin was a little odd. Good-odd or bad-odd, he really couldn't tell.

"You sure you want to keep on squirming like that? Not that I'm complaining of course." Hiccup's breath hitched; he knew that voice and the purr at the end only caused his mortification level to sky-rocket.

"J-JACK? Wh-what's going on?" Certain scenarios were playing in his mind; truly, this had been the closest to a horror movie experience that Hiccup had encountered thus far...(regretfully with a bit of erotica in the mix as well).

The chuckle that escaped the spirit's lips trailed light shivers down Hiccup's spine. "Wouldn't you like to know?" What was he playing at?

"Jack, this is seri—" Hiccup jumped (as much as he could anyways) as a cool finger traced the contour of his cheek, seeming to drawing mindless patterns from his freckles. He squeaked as the hand descended all the way down to his jaw and neck, leaving bright blushes in its wake.

"Smooth—" The whispered comment had Hiccup's whole face glowing red.

"WHAT—" "WHY?" This was too weird and too much. His thoughts were in shambles as icy hands set his skin ablaze, each nerve pulsing tremors down his body. It was dark, he didn't know what was going on (though he unfortunately had an idea as to where it was leading to), and what was confusing him the most was that—"

He wasn't really fighting it.

Hiccup's breathing only quickened in pace as frigid laughter reverberated through the darkness. "'_Why_?' You always seem to ask that. Wouldn't it be better to just sit back and—"

"_Watch_?" Hiccup drawled, sarcasm dripping from his voice.

"Well, since you can't exactly do that—" The teen bit back a gasp as Jack's hand traveled just a little lower, playing around his chest. "You can always just _enjoy_."

At any other given situation, Hiccup would've probably snorted at the proposal; in this situation he was pretty sure his face was reddening like a tomato. "What are you suggesting you pervert!" What he wouldn't give for the ability to smack those hands away.

"A good opportunity to have some fun." The mirth the Guardian's his voice was absolutely aggravating. What was more so to the teen was the squeak he emitted as he felt a sharp pinch on his nose.

Did he just _nip his—"?_ Oh, Hiccup was _never_ going to let Jack live this one down. "Y-you—" a strangled moan stole the next few words right from Hiccup's mouth; the teen bit his lip to prevent a whimper from joining in as Jack played with a hardened nipple.

"That's rightâ€¦don't hold back." This was too humiliating; it was made even more so when the other hand joined in to arouse the sensitive nub. "I want to hear everything." And as much as Hiccup hated to admitâ€¦the Guardian's words were also taking a toll.

"J-Jackâ€¦" This wasn't fair; this wasn't fair at all. Gasps and mewls spilled from his lips as a hot mouth descended on his skin, licking and kissing areas he didn't even know could draw such reactions from him. His body was burning but the Ice Spirit's ministrations threw off his equilibrium further as arctic fire drowned his system. He was suffocating from the smoldering heat that enveloped his body and the cool reprieve from the Ice Spirit's skin against him.

A particularly hard bite to his neck drew a low groan from the teen. The Guardian soothed the area with his tongue, lapping and sucking on the skin; Hiccup knew that it was going to leave a very prominent mark. "That's rightâ€¦it's _Jack_. " The Winter Spirit trailed kisses up and down the sensitive flesh near his ear. Hiccup gasped as Jack nipped a lobe, making the skin flush red from the contact. "Not _JÃ¶kul_, not some myth from your childhood or storybook character mommy and daddy used to scare you with about freezing to death during winter." His lips traveled to his cheeks now, tenderly pressing against feverish skin before settling a mere kiss's distance from Hiccup's panting mouth. "Besides, I'm getting you hot right now, aren't I?" he murmured against him before crushing their lips together.

In the back of Hiccup's mind, his consciousness recognized the action as a kiss; the simple act of one pair of lips meeting with another, a touch of mouths added with a little pressure. It was simple enough to identify, simple enough to comprehend. He knew what a kiss was. But how could he have known it felt everything _but_ simple? It was the marriage of fire and ice, sparks of embers and frost colliding with the very sensation of Jack's mouth moving against his, forcing his lips to part and plunging an adventurous tongue into his cavern, tasting, teasing, and stealing each other's breath while the world spun dizzily in darkness as Hiccup's eyes invented splashes of white, pleasure searing through his thoughts.

It was only when breathing became a problem for him that he tried moving his head away; However, Jack seemed keen on having his fill, cannibalistically devouring his mouth. So it left Hiccup with no choice but to bite down hard on the tongue so apt on making his play along with its slippery dance. Jack withdrew with a pained noise while Hiccup coughed the saliva out from his airway. "You _asshole_â€¦" the teen wheezed. Reallyâ€¦the kiss was great and everything but it was getting too headyâ€¦and too gross with the tonguing.

Jack scoffed. "And you call _me_ impatient?" Hiccup could tell he was leering; what's with the bad jokes?

Nonetheless, that didn't stop the splotch of rouge embarrassment to blossom. "Don't saâ€¦_imply_ things like that."

Jack chuckled, amused and sincereâ€¦a sound that Hiccup was more familiar with. "Why? You're cuter when you blush."

Somehow, that made the teen feel more at ease (the laugh, not the comment). "I always blush," the teen mumbled, '_Pale skin and allâ€|'_

"You're always cute." Hiccup could definitely hear the smirk in his voice.

With an exasperated sigh, the teen tried his best to look absolutely repulsed. "Justâ€|just stop. Please, just stop."

"You're telling me one thingâ€|" Hiccup yelped as the Ice Spirit's fingertip grazed the head of the brunet's very erectâ€|and very responsive cock. "Your body tells me something else." He teased the slit, gathering the precum that dribbled down and smearing it languidly, probably watching Hiccup squirm with ravenous eyes.

"Ahâ€|!" Was it a bad thing that Hiccup wasn't even surprised about these turn of events anymore? "Will youâ€|pleaseâ€|at least _quit_ with the clichÃ©s?" Yes, it was probably a bad thingâ€|then again, this was like something from Astrid's BL fantasiesâ€|imported all the way from Hel.

The Winter Spirit snickered. "You really need to loosen up." He released the stiff member, drawing a soft whine from Hiccup at the loss of contact.

The teen, however, attempted to mask it with an annoyed groan. "Gods I hope that wasn't another pun."

He had a bad feeling Jack wasn't fooled. "Wasn't intending for it, but that's a good idea."

Cold fingers grazed his inner thigh and all sorts of sirens went off in Hiccup's head as staggering warmth crept through his lower body and the panic that rushed through his voice. "Jack!"

"I was only kidding!" His laughter was airy, (deceptively so) and dismissive of the matter. The searching fingers were gone and now only the cool presence of the Winter Guardian's body remained mixing with the heated air.

Hiccup felt himself relax and willed his heartbeat to resume its ordinary cadence though his voice wobbled with the clarity of his thoughts. "O-okayâ€|good."

Until Jack playfully pinched his hip. "For now."

"WHAT?" The cry was shamefully loud but right then, Hiccup didn't quite care so much about that.

"Wellâ€|can you blame me?" That dark edge in Jack's voice was back causing an inkling of desire to ignite in his veins. "Seeing you like thisâ€|all spread out, blushing and shivering for my touch." Hiccup's breathing became shallow as the images of ice-blue eyes, hazy with desire, roamed his flushed flesh, deliciously immobile and wantonly begging to be taken. The flash of panic that threatened to burst was quickly diffused by the lascivious longing that raced through his body like wildfire as Jack took Hiccup's member in his hand and teasingly stroked the weeping organ.

"_Haahhâ€|ngghâ€|" The feel of gelid fingers enclosed around his most sensitive part, torturously teasing him with slow strokes, made his blood blaze and voice choke as each digit awakened a carnal and hedonistic hunger. His head was swimming, restraint crashing under waves of ecstasy that murmured wicked promises as logic began to sink. A keening sound left Hiccup's lips as a sharp bite marked the plane of skin between his shoulder and neck.

The teen felt feverish and dizzy as laughter pleasingly rumbled through the body atop his. "You're already excited and you make _wonderful_ noises." He added just a bit more pressure to the teen's captive sex, earning a shaky gasp and a loud mewl.

Hiccup valiantly tried to give Jack (wherever he was facing) the nastiest glare he could manage. "P-pervertâ€|"

The placating kiss to his lips told him that Jack didn't find it all too intimidating. "You say that, but you and I both know I'm not the only one enjoying this." A rough stroke to his dick told him the same.

"Ahâ€"Jack!" Gods he hated how needy his voice sounded.

"Yes? I'm listening." He hated Jack's arrogant tone even more, even though he did admit that the cool lips pressed to his burning skin made him dizzy in a nauseatingly thrilled way.

But for his own sake, maybe he could ignore the bastard's haughtiness. "Iâ€"please, justâ€|" After all, he couldn't take it; his body was quivering like he had just he had been struck by a blizzard, his heart was hammering like bolts of electricity surged through his veins, and his mind was steadily losing itself from constant barrages of Jack's debilitating attacks of cold hands and hot open-mouthed kisses. Pride crumbled to nothing in the devastating wake of lustful venom; the white flag was all too ready to be wavedâ€|

"'Just' what, _Hikke_? You already said the magic word." Frigid breath fanned his ear, delighted in teasing his dear prisoner. Hiccup jumped (as much as he could anyways) as the Frost Spirit nipped a sensitive lobe. "Now, tell me what you want, babe."

Hiccup felt his eye twitch at the hypocorism. "JUST GET ON WITH IT!" He really hoped that damaged the Guardian's hearing.

"All right, geez!" Jack laughed. "That's the spirit." His smirk could almost shine right through the darkness.

Suddenly it seemed as though the world had ceased rotation on its axis, null of centrifugal force and the vital galaxy star felt as though it was on the verge of a supernova's climaxâ€"but really, all Jack did was heartily pump the dripping cock in his hand while lavishing his infuriatingly aroused lover with fevered kisses that seeped desirous promises, inked with heady saccharine toxins. The teen's heart thrummed with a wild metronomic velocity, pulse hammering against his skin, every nerve buzzing with tingling sparks cascading to the very tips of his toes, capability of all thought and motion discarded along with every sense of existence because right now all the brunet felt was every excruciating stroke on his

throbbing sex, the flash of pleasure at every nibble and bite to his skin, and the heady presence of the spirit above him, the very root of all this lust and lunacy.

Still, the mild vigor of his touches did not overwhelm and therefore did not satisfy, only feeding the ravaging flames that coiled heat like deadly serpents in his stomach. The teen longed to twist and writhe but only succeeded in crying out as dexterous fingers languidly teased the weeping slit. "Ngh, c'monâ€¦fasterâ€¦" the whine dissipated behind a rough kiss, a cry taking its throne as tongues invaded and passions were exchanged.

Jack, surprisingly, was the first to pull back. "Demanding, aren't you?" He withdrew his hand and Hiccup had to bite his kiss-bruised lip to keep from whimpering at the loss. Though he couldn't see, Hiccup could feel his eyes widen as the Guardian shifted on the bed and placed himself between the brunet's legs. "Hmâ€¦I wonderâ€¦" Oh no... Hiccup did not like where this was going.

"W-wonder whaâ€¦!" The scream that followed, surprisingly, did not destroy Jack's eardrums. However, the scorching sensation of Jack's mouth around his cock, swallowing him whole, nearly gave Hiccup a heart attack. "Iâ€¦Iâ€¦oh, oh, oh Gods, whatâ€¦what are youâ€¦ohhh!" Then again, what could be expected out of a teen's first blowjob?

(Ice was exhilarating on his virgin skin but fire was far more consuming, far more enthralling, far more dangerous to be played with as each searing touch surged him closer and closer towards the brink of euphoriaâ€¦!)

Jack released the softening organ with a lewd pop. "Bitter." The brunet didn't need eyes to see the grimace on the Winter Spirit's face.

Hiccup scoffed, still shaky upon the aftermath of the novel experience. "Oh, and I suppose yours tastes like frosting?"

"Frosting, yeah funny," the spirit snorted. "You know, you're very mouthy despite your circumstance." Hiccup was startled as two hands landed on either side of his head making him feel quite trapped. "Here, want a taste?"

Hiccup found himself cringing at the acrid flavor that forced its way into his mouth. All the while, Jack just moved his lips lazily against his, seeming to enjoying the pleasurable contact as Hiccup began evidently reciprocatingâ€¦even if it was just a reaction to the strange taste. As ravenous lips trailed downwards in its sinful path, Hiccup largely focused his attention on the sour remnants. "Ugh, I don'tâ€¦like tasting myself."

The lips paused, hovering over a bite-marked collarbone. "Oh? You've done that before, huh?"

Why was it that the dumbest things always made him blush so brilliantly? "Iâ€¦"

That lecherous grin was definitely back; sight was not needed to know. "That's kinda hot."

"I was curious!" the teen defended, veiling his mortification with a dark scowl.

The teeth returned to his freckled skin, bruising delicate flesh with ardent displays and eliciting a small mewl from Hiccup's throat.

"Curiosity killed the cat."

"Satisfaction brought him back," was Hiccup's retort. It was eerily quiet for a few seconds before the sentence finally registered in his head. The brunet groaned (this time, out of weariness). "â€|Why does it feel like you're grinning creepily at me?"

Because he probably was. The bastard. "Oh, no reason."

The kiss that landed on his lips mirrored the enthusiasm of their first, but the actions remained unhurried; the touches were tentative and though fingers sought, pressed, and groped, there ingrained this ephemeral spell leaving the teen lightheaded and content. This must have been some trap from the very beginning because within a few moments, the embers roared back to life as movements grew fervent and frenzied; the kisses burned with angry fire while the skin against his nipped with bitter cold. Gasps and moans (reassuringly, not all were from Hiccup) filled the previously tranquil atmosphere as something akin to possessiveness and passion stole away the calm and casual air. A deep groan clawed its way out of the teen's throat at the Guardian's evident excitement as it brushed against his own growing interest.

Jack nuzzled his cheek affectionately, the action in stark contrast with the wanton way he began grinding his hips against the pinned brunet. "_Satisfied_ yet?" he purred.

It was perhaps part of Hiccup's nature to bicker and banter; whether it was induced through stubbornness-issues or not, Hiccup never did learn how to take things quietly. "Not sureâ€|is that the best you got?"

Fortunately for Jack, it made things all the more _fun_. "That's what I like to hear." The spirit adjusted Hiccup's legs to fit around his hips, running his hands up and down the brunet's thighs. The skin quivered with excitement, muscles clenching from anticipation as fingers massaged the area so close to the Guardian's actual target. Pearly globs dribbled down Hiccup's erect sex, collected by Jack's waiting finger. The teen's breathing became erratic as one of the Winter Spirit's hands tried to soothe his aching reactions while the other messily coated itself with his precum. Jack kissing around his sensitive neck wasn't doing him much good either.

Hiccup was on the verge of being pulled under the tides of rapture until something very cold and very slick began prodding at a certain entrance between his legs. "J-Jack?" It came out as a choked whisper rather than the screeching interrogation the brunet was going for.

"Hm?" he murmured against Hiccup's bite-dotted neck. "I said '_yet_' didn't I?" The Ice Spirit pressed a chaste kiss on the teen's forehead as the prodding finger pressed past the tense hole and into the hot ring of muscle.

The intrusion induced a loud yelp from the immobile brunet. He cringed as the appendage wriggled to loosen the passage. "Itâ€"it feels weirdâ€"|" And it did. Especially when another cum-slicked finger joined in soon after.

Jack released a breathy chuckle. "But kinda good, yeah?" Damn, Hiccup was eating his fingers alive, enveloping them in that incredible heat; it couldn't be long beforeâ€"|" "Especially when I touch thiâ€"|"

"_Ah!_"_ Oh, what lovely sounds he discovered Hiccup could make...

The brunet shook as fingers rubbed against the bundle of nerves that made electricity shoot down his spine and released a plethora of embarrassing moans from his reluctant mouth. Each brush of the two fingers (waitâ€"|"make that three now) only added fuel to the blazing hearth as cries and exaltations of Gods and damnations of Jack's name formed a salacious symphony in the darkness. His cock was aching to be touched, weeping to be sent over the edge in completion, but apparently the Guardian was more entranced with the way Hiccup clamped down on his fingers as Jack began to thrust them in and out of the teen's ass, lubricated with the brunet's own precum.

Hiccup yelped as the fingers withdrew, feeling strangely empty. He then felt appropriately panicked as something _much bigger than three fingers_ rubbed against his entrance with a slippery head. "Ready?" The breathy inquiry did not calm Hiccup at all.

In fact, Hiccup was pretty sure that his heart stopped. "Re-ready? Ready forâ€"|"

"Yeahâ€"|"you didn't think you'd get all the fun, right?" Well, judging by the rather stiff and leaking cock pressed against his ass, Hiccup was pretty damn sure Jack had his share of fun as well.

There was one final kiss pressed to his lips: Hiccup had anticipated it to be a hard, demanding kiss that vented all frustrations and sexual tensions; instead, a mere embrace of one pair of lips against another, sweet and innocent like children, soft and fluid like rain drops, amorous and patient like nothing Hiccup had felt before, and was perfectly unexpected.

The following pain of the intrusion, however, was slightly less so.

"I want you to relax, all right?" Jack again tried to soothe the brunet who was currently having a fit of understandable pain and terror. Between gulps of breath and tremors that danced down his body as the teen forced himself to calm down, Hiccup vaguely noted how tense the Guardian above him had become; as the pain subsided to a dull ache, Jack's head dropped to Hiccup's shoulder, chilly pants fanning his hot skin. The metaphorical light bulb flickered on in the darkness and Hiccup realized that Jack was having a bit of trouble...

But it wasn't until his name left Jack's mouth in nothing short of pure worship that Hiccup concluded that it was probably dealing with the Ice Spirit's diminishing restraint and was probably just _dying_ to take him. The revelation flashed desire straight to his dick,

reveling in the effect he had on the cocky spirit.

Jack's gasps came in short staccatos, reinforcing Hiccup's conclusion. "Because it's taking a whole lot just so I don'tâ€" "

"Fuck me through the mattress?" There was no stopping that cheeky remark from passing his lips. The smirk was quickly removed by a mewl as Jack drove himself forward, just barely grazing the sweet spot that made Hiccup see stars.

Jack's guttural groan didn't ease the need for release at all. "Don't say stuff like that unless you want me to come." Hiccup bit back a cry as Jack sunk his teeth into warm skin; a warning, a turn-on, whatever the case was, the teen wasn't backing down.

"So close?" the brunet teased.

"So eager?" the spirit bantered.

Hiccup laughed a drunken little giggle, giddy and shameless. "Maybeâ€" | "

The teen almost laughed at the stunned silence that followedâ€"until Hiccup felt that same lecherous smirk against his skin. "â€"Good." From the way Jack spread him wide open and hooked his knees over the Guardian's sides, a trickle of regret slithered its way down Hiccup's spine before Jack rammed himself all the way inside his sharp-tongued lover.

In the initial moments, as their screams collided in the sex-laden air, Hiccup didn't know which facet of the two quarreling sensations dominated his mind: the intense pain or staggering pleasure. What he did know was that he was crying (stupidly) out loud as Jack made shallow thrusts, inching his way in and out of his lover, never quite leaving the gripping heat, and always managing to hit that one little target that reduced the smart-mouthed teen to a moaning mess. As time progressed, each little bit of movement became more and more erratic, evolving to full-blown slams into the teen's most private erogenous zone.

The result of the action led Hiccup to focus on two things: One) Jack was doing an amazing job; every time he drove himself into Hiccup, the teen never failed to cry out of blinding bliss from the assault. The pain subsided leaving only ecstasy to endure through every rough thrust that hit the teen's prostate just right, spiraling sanity out the door; every playful growl and possessive bite only added to the sweet contrast of his hot blood and his (literally) cold lover, of forced submission and open dominance, of tender kisses and feral lovemaking. And from the way Jack was slowly losing himself to the experience (every plunge into the teen rewarded Hiccup with wild groans and trembling breaths), the brunet was doing a pretty damn good job too.

Two) His dire need to move right now. It was undeniably maddening that Jack could pleasure and tease Hiccup to the brink of Valhalla, but in all regards, he was absolutely helpless. His fingers could do nothing but clench weakly as he struggled to maintain his hold on reality as each and every mind-blowing tide of pleasure threatened to send him over the edge. His legs were spread wide open for Jack's

eyes and his indulgence, exposing himself to whatever wicked schemes the Ice Spirit had in store. There was veritably nothing he could do in his situation other than to yelp, plead, moan, and mewl. He was at the Guardian of Winter's absolute mercy.

It was the friction, it was the heat, it was the cold, it was the smell of sex, it was the melody of intimacy, it was Jack—it was all Jack. He was everywhere and Hiccup was drowning from cool lips, wandering fingers, and heady thrusts; from gentle kisses, tender caresses, and fervent passion. He was drowning in its lost meaning and why his heart (already beating to the point of exhaustion) threatened to burst from his chest.

"Jack, I—oh—Hel— I'm so close—" Another shameless cry came as Hiccup's train of thought was derailed after a ruthless thrust fed his ravaging lust. The serpents tightened their coils, thoughts erasing all else until frenzy alone remained. He was close, so, so, so close.

"Y-yeah, me too..." The Ice Spirit's voice was quivering, overcome by carnal wants, overwhelmed by concealed ardor. "Hiccup, I—" But the words would not come; instead, they locked themselves away and sank beneath the inky depths of avid lust and unspoken love. So it was a kiss instead: the touch of two stardust creatures entangled in reprieve's illusion, yet the spirit poured every ounce of love into the act. Heart, soul, longing, yearning, craving, secrets, promises, and that one unspoken emotion poured into that one simple action, like a flood gate crashing down and dispensing its never-ending torrents into a cup. In the softest of whispers, he murmured against the precious flesh, his voice piercing straight into the teen's heart and soul, a simple request: "Fall in love with me."

That was one final push, one ultimate flare of realization as Hiccup screamed and darkness was overturned by fervid white. All Hiccup could do was call out the spirit's name as the fantasy drew to a close.

"—Jack!"

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Hiccup's eyes shot open, sight not quite adjusting to the darkness of the room. Jack's silhouette faced him, moonlight spilling from his window outlining the shadowy figure. The teen blinked and then gave a weak yawn, allowing sleep to take him once more. But as he drifted to and fro betwixt the thresholds of illusions and realities, he did wonder what caused him to jolt awake so abruptly. Within the final seconds before he closed his eyes, the teen silently mourned his inability to recall his dreams.

And as an afterthought, he figured he'd worry about the strange ache between his legs the following morning.

As for Jack, the spirit mourned his awakening before his actual climax.

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Elsewhere, Cupid sighed while Bartok chirped happily. She flicked the smug little creature away, only slightly pleased at the sound of his

terrified trills. She turned her gaze to the strand of pink, untouched by her own beautiful nightmare. She shook her head and started off towards her chambers to lock the Desire's Dust away. "Well, so much for thatâ€¦maybe I'll just leave them be." The clacking of her heels echoed through the Domain.

From a distance, splayed against a web-enveloped portrait, Bartok seemed to scoff; he knew his Mistress well. Had anyone else been able to interpret his comment, it would have gone something along the lines of, "Right. As if."

* * *

><p>If anyone needs an explanation as to what the hell just happened, here it is: Yes, Cupid used a "wet dream" to try and bring Hiccup and Jack together so they might move on to the "sexual tension" phase of their relationship. Unfortunately, Hiccup is quite a deep sleeper (which goes with the whole "can't see anything, can't move either" part of his experience). Also, he can't remember his dreams, so boo. Jack, unfortunately, can (Cupid got the dust on Jack's end of the thread as well). This can also be used to explain why Sandy didn't pay Hiccup a visit in the last chapter~ As for why Jack's mouth was hotâ€¦well, I just assume that not every part of Jack is cold (I do make him blush pink/red, don't I?).

*= In many cultures, red is considered the color appropriate for marriage due to its symbolism of happiness and luck while white is used for funerals. There's also a shade of red called "Lust."

*= Anastasia reference: Bartok and "This can only end in tears!"

*= In his "dream," Hiccup was undergoing aâ€¦veryâ€¦very severe form of sleep paralysis which was once believed to be associated with paranormal experiences. This chapter is actually a parody of my other story "Berceuse," which shares that concept.

Fun Fact: Weirdly enough, a word that almost sounds like Hiccup (pronounced Hikap) means "touch" in my native dialect.

(And so this is how I spent my sick-day away from school.)

13. Carpathia and Contradictions

Well it's been a while, but life is funny like that, isn't it? In a sadistic way haha, so thanks for all the support but I unfortunately did not get to compete for State. Still, it was a great experience being in contest for something that I love, so I thank everyone for reading this story and all your words of encouragement (and patience I am so sorry you don't even understand how badly I feel for the long wait). I'm still here and will be trying my very best to finish this story during the summer!

Longer chapter too, so I hope you guys enjoy!

ALSO SOMEONE MADE FANART FOR THIS STORY. GREAT GATSBY, I NEVER THOUGHT THAT DAY WOULD COME. A shoutout to the amazing **soulrhapsody** for the wonderful work!

Warnings: More Cupid-centric in this chapter, (also a brief history

lesson at the footnotes) language (just a tad), clichés, and fluff. And Hiccup getting flustered. A lot.

****Just Call Me Endy****, thanks for sticking with me through this.

****Disclaimer:**** I own nothing but a laptop and certain plot elements.

* * *

><p>It was the sensation of drowning, plummeting to icy depths that gripped the senses in suffocating vices. Fear operated in ironic splendor: prevalent in the senses like inky blots that target the eye's focus until the world fell away to nothing more than the glaring blackness. It was frighteningly simple yet it wholly consumed the atmosphere in one feral gulp before even a mind's moment had passed. Planetary orbit seemed to gravitate towards the situation at hand and time itself paused in its continual flux to zero in on the ominous affair. Like a vice, terror grasped impatience by its thin neck, drawing out sensibility from its wide eyes to steal it away. With greedy hands, it squeezed anxiety and enslaved it to a little dance to feebly and jerkily move to. With Toothiana, terror drove the Guardian of Memories to North's for something of a crisis assembly in the North Pole.<p>

"This is really serious!" The excitable woman's wings beat in rapidity as she hovered, almost as though her heart would give out should she fall still. Toothiana looked to the other Guardians, their expressions ranging from the confused, to the concerned, to the disgruntled.

Bunnymund raised a paw, still trying to grasp everything through the commotion; really, she might've at least tried to pick a better time for this. "Hold on there, ya called us all out here just forâ€"

North pushed past Bunnymund and settled a placating hand on her shoulder, the large man disregarding the indignant huff from the Easter Bunny. At present, the obvious stress was definitely not helping the nervous woman. "Now, now Tooth; there must be explanation for what you have told us."

(Then again, there are those that stand in the grays of confusion.)

Sandy shifted worriedly about, mulling over the information. He brought his hand to his chin, golden grains flying about, unsure in a final form of what to say.

The Tooth Fairy shook her head, ignoring the worried looks. "No! I swear, it's true! Jack's in loveâ€"

"Lo-love? That's why we're here? That's why you had North call us in to his ice-trap?" Bunnymund shot her a longsuffering gaze, ignoring North's affronted expression. So was this why the Guardian of Fun had been neglecting his duties? "Augh, really Tooth, just because the bloody joker's gone and found himself a Missusâ€"

"_Mister,_" Tooth corrected.

"â€"doesnâ€"waiâ€"what_?" At any other time, the others would have laughed at the perplexed look on the Easter Bunny's face. Well, there was a snicker here and there from North as the Guardian of Hope backtracked and attempted to make sense of the information once more.

Toothiana swiveled to face them. "It's true! And guysâ€|" she took a breath, fear creeping in rapidly causing feathers to ruffle and her voice to quiver. "He's a human _teenager_."

The result of the disclosed information was nothing less than a gaping ovation. Nearby, a mischievous elf with a stolen cookie in his mouth froze on the spot while an unsettling silence bore down on the four. Unsure of what to do, Dangle bit down on the sugary confection, eyes darting this way and that as though awaiting certain calamity. The resulting crunch effectively ended the silence. Mouths promptly clicked shut before sputtering, uproars, and Dreamsand filled North's vast hall with skepticism and panicked babbling.

"What?" North was taken aback by surprise, but more than shocked, he was intrigued.

Sandy fitfully followed up with a glittering interrobang.

Tooth nodded vigorously. "Yes! A teenager!" Her wings flitted wildly as she nervously hovered about.

Bunny shook his head firmly and crossed his arms. "Not possible. Ya know the rules. No teenager has _ever_â€" "

"Wellâ€|" North hummed, stroking his beard and lapsing into silence once more. An image of an old sleigh bell resounded through his memories, dazed but persistent, before slipping away before too much could be said; perhaps it was not time to bring that up. "That can be debatedâ€|"

The Easter Bunny scoffed. "What are ya goin' on about now?"

North shrugged, ignoring Bunny's suspicious glare. "Is nothing to be concerned with."

Eyes narrowed, the Guardian of Hope scowled at the man in red. "Now hold on there, are you hidin' somethin'?"

Sandy sighed and reached over to the snacking elf and, before another distraction erupted, grabbed the little creature by the head and shook vigorously, wincing as crumbs spewed around him. The familiar jingling of bells brought three pairs of eyes to the petite man. His expression remained fixedly stern as he released the slacking worker. Swirling grains of gold formed a heart over his head. Looking at Tooth, a large question mark was slapped over it immediately.

"That's right!" Tooth fidgeted anxiously. "I know they're together! I _saw_ them!"

Bunny cocked a brow. "Saw 'em? How?"

An unwilling blush bloomed across her cheeks at the memory as she shifted her gaze to the floor. Sweet and taken from the secrets of night, it had been quite a private moment. "Wellâ€|Jamie told me thatâ€|"

The Easter Bunny stopped her right there. "Waitâ€|did you sayâ€|_Jamie_?" North and Sandy's blood ran cold at the mention of the little Bennett boy.

"Yes." Tooth sighed, knowing that the teen's relation to Jamie could further complicate the matter. "This boy that Jack's seeing is Jamie's babysitter."

North's eyes widened, horror starting to rise as the pieces began to fall into place. "Sandyâ€|you do not thinkâ€|"

The Guardian of Dreams froze, processed the information, connected the dots, and then smacked his forehead, pained more by the realization than the physical impact.

North sighed heavily, dramatically falling onto a large chair with a crestfallen swoon. "Oh! Young loveâ€|how did I not see it before!"

Sandy shook his head and plopped down to an adjacent seat, head in his hands, joining the large man in wallowing through the guilt.

Unsympathetic of the display, Bunny began to seethe. "Wait, you two knew about this?" The two Guardians shrank under the Easter Bunny's angry glare.

"We only knew Jack met friend of Jamie. Not babysitter of Jamie!" North quickly added.

There were times where Bunnymund knew yelling would only prove counterproductive. So, instead, he hissed out his words with a faint threat, muffled and hazardous in striking unison. "Wait, so you're tellin' me that Frost got himself in this messâ€|with the help of you two?" He'd much rather have them explain what exactly went through their minds (if anything at all) that culminated to this disaster.

"Ahâ€|wellâ€|" North hesitated before seeing the incarnation of death in the Guardian of Hope's eyes; accepting defeat seemed like the only way to go about. "Guilty," he answered shortly.

Sandy nodded with a helpless shrug, stare darting away from the towering and menacing figure.

Bunny appeared ready to murder them if the homicidal look in his eyes indicated anything, but it was Tooth's concerned cry that ceased the squabbling. "Guys! Focus! We have to do something!" The three looked to each other with a quiet intensity before releasing a breath and relaxing their postures. Anger and blame could wait, but imminent doom forcibly captured all attention and held distractions hostage.

Bunny sighed, ears twitching in irritation. "Well what do ya want us to do? Send out the Yetis and throw 'im in a sack?"

"It worked the last time," North defended with a resentful huff.

The Easter Bunny scoffed. "And then what? Scold 'im like the ankle biter he is and forbid 'im from seein' this boy?" A sardonic chuckle bubbled from his chest before drawling out, "Yeahâ€|that'll work out perfectly._"

"Noâ€|weâ€|ugh." Toothiana rubbed her temples, willing the alarm (and irritation) from her thoughts. "Maybeâ€|not _direct _confrontationâ€|maybe it won't have to be so drastic."

The Guardian of Hope rolled his eyes. "Have you _met_ Frost? It'll take a lot more than an earbashing to get through _his_ thick skull."

"Maybe not soâ€|" North contemplated quietly without further say.

Bunny sighed in impatience. "Well? What d'ya mean by that?"

"Perhapsâ€|situation is not as serious as it appears." It was something the Guardian of Wonder could hold on to at least; he knew very well that Jack treasured the scarce contact he had with his Believers. It could be mere infatuation or perhaps a very extreme form of kinship Jack found with the other teenager, a guiding light, a comforting voice amid a soundless ocean. But it wasn't something for North to sayâ€|"not now. After all, what was Santa Clause without a hint of _mystery_ to him as well?

Tooth shook her head, sighing. The images were embedded to the core of her worry, the heart of her distress, and fueled something akin to shock and an acrid emotion she couldn't quite put a finger on. "I _saw_ them asleep. _Together_. _Holding hands._" At least to the Tooth Fairy, no further investigation was needed.

"That could mean many things, Tooth," the man in red replied placidly. "We still do not know for sure."

Sandy gave her a strange look. But it was awfully difficult to signal how on earth Toothiana actuallyâ€|found them like that. Or why she had thought it was appropriate to be there in the first place. So, as always, the Guardian of Dreams kept his mouth shut.

Bunnymund stifled a chuckle; despite the grave circumstances, the image of the Guardian of _Fun_ doing something so sickeningly sweet sparked mirth to the entire outlook. "Crickey, really? 'Holdin' hands'?" He overlooked Tooth's offended glare. "That sounds like somethin' straight outta some dreadful love story."

"Wait!" The group started as North leaped from the chair, a contemplative look in his eyes. "'_Dreadful'_â€|'_Love'_â€|" Struck by epiphany, North snapped his fingers in enthusiasm. "Idea!"

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Cupid lounged lazily in the main control room; several of her spiders tapped and typed in monotonous concentration, little clicks and

chirps evolving to a seamless melody. The phone lines tangled along with the silks of her duty—love and fortune crisscrossing as desperate souls sought to meet their mates. But really, there was only so much she and her little ones could do; she sighed and silently blamed the bureaucracy. She twirled in her chair while her spiders assisted and managed (or at least, attempted to manage) the love lives of the entire planet.

This was the second aspect of her duty—administration. And she so loathed it. The operations were minor fixes, short investments, and never permanent solutions. Affection, longing, fear, happiness, love, frustration, anger, catastrophe—such was the norm. And what could the personification of humanity's most dangerous emotion do but to allow nature to take its course?

It wasn't until a small blip appeared on the screen of the web-monitor that a minor reprieve was afforded and captured some of her fickle interest. Bartok, atop her shoulder on a "short" break, squeaked in astonishment (not many people had direct access to his mistress's number, so it must be of importance.) With a final pat, she shooed off her little helper, a signal to get back to work. He harrumphed but after a stern look from his boss, he chirped a little farewell before darting off to his station; it was nightfall in his sector—a busy time for little love-dwellers such as himself as wishes were often revealed in the dark.

Raising a brow, Cupid then smirked at the name on the screen. "And here come the entourage. Hmph. About time—" The confirmation they sought would come—she knew it to be inevitable. But a phone call? She half-expected yetis to come bursting through her doors with a sack. She cleared her throat before taking the receiver, greeting animatedly in an uncharacteristic fashion. "Hello, this is Cupid's Hotline, where Romance is only a Ring away! How may I be of service?"

On the other line, North nodded happily, giving a thumbs up to the crowding Guardians, eager to eavesdrop on the conversation. "Yes, hello, is this Cu—"?

Cupid bit her lip, suffocating the burst of laughter before it could be released for her 'customer' to hear. "May I ask who is calling?"

"Ah, yes," North cleared his throat before attempting to command a formal tone. "It is Nicholas Saint North of the North Pole calling on official business—"

"Ya drongo, it's her!" Cupid had to hold her hand to the receiver just so she could cackle loudly at the memorable voice of aggravation that belonged to none other than an old—friend.

There was a short scuffle and Cupid had to wonder if the mental image of an overgrown rabbit and Santa Clause fighting over a phone really was as amusing as she found it. She grinned as North whispered harshly, "Bunny, please! If you interrupt she will—"

"Hang on one moment, sir." It was cruel. She knew it, but she really didn't want to pass up the opportunity to be able to say this to Santa himself: "I'll have you on hold and transfer you over to our service reception where they will present you with a variety of

optionsâ€" "

North's voice boomed from the handset. "NOW LOOK WHAT YOU HAVE DONE!" Cupid considered it a small blessing that Bartok had departed; otherwise, the positively wicked look on his mistress's face as she listened on heartlessly would have no doubt terrified him.

Again, there was a tussle before a familiar cry came through: "Cupid! Ya she-devil. I know it's you!"

Her mouth curled to a wicked smile and before she could stop herself, a little song tumbled from her lips:

"Is it now? Is that so?

Am I the 'devil'

You claim to know?"

North blinked, taken aback by the eerie lilt of the previously chipper female's voice. "So, you _are_ Cupid?" And before Bunnymund could silence the needless question, a familiar tune rang from the woman on the other side.

"My name is a game, a prize to be sought:"

He fought the urge to smack himself, instead only pinching the bridge of his nose as irritation seeped through his voice. "Oh bloody hell, she's gone off with her riddlesâ€"|"

Cupid pointedly ignored him.

Glittering gold ages, may reveal gilded rust!

A pretty pick fit for true emotions: broughtâ€" "

Lavenders!* Lovely blues of devotion and distrust!

Careful nowâ€"as meanings oft divide.

Affairs and flowers wither

In time, as do I."

The robust man hummed, partaking in the woman's odd little game. "Glitters then rusts, devotion and distrustâ€"Love withers like flowers and can be mistakenâ€" you _are_ Cupid!" He laughed heartily, oblivious to Bunny's shaking head and burning glare.

She held back a giggle, lazily drawling out her next melody.

"The gentleman here!

Oh, he's won a prize!

He presents the clear

devil in disguise!"

There was some racket from the other line before the next reply came.

"Cupid," Bunny seethed. "We've been through this before: stop with your games. This isn't the time for this! It hasn't been for centuries!* Or did ya crack a fruity after all this time?" He expected that shrill burst of laughter from the other side of the line; still, the sound reverberated in an uneasy way like listening from a distance to a forlorn cry at the brink of heartbreak.

Cupid feigned wiping a tear for an absent audience as offhanded rhythms and rhymes wove half-truths and half-secrets.

"Madness and love, age-old friends!

Siren-sung sailors met Porphyria's* shared end!

Am I to be feared? Is it implied? Oh, do not jest!

I am Love! Dear, _faithful _Love. May your mind restâ€"

For when does Love carve scars on this earth?

Of courseâ€" evermore! Lunacy is my hearth!

Tragedy is my shadow, how can I forget?

But do not distressâ€"_hope_ may live yet!"

Bunnymund stiffened, clutching the receiver just a bit tighter, ear pressed a little harder against the plastic.

The woman could hardly contain a demented little chuckle, as if sensing the apprehension.

"For in madness, ugly truth thrives:

The very craze which crafts tragic lives."

There was a tense quiet before a soft voice broke through the congealing strain. "Cupidâ€|please listen! We need your help." It was Toothiana's voice, she mused. Cupid shook her head; she wasn't any fun. The woman was always so stiff in her company. Only Bunny really seemed to _enjoy_ her songs.

It was North that came next. It was a pity that she could not witness what the Sandman had to say; it was obvious her tune had some sort of effect on them. Was she dangerously misleading or ominously advising? Well, that was for them to interpret. "She is correct, Cupid. It is one of our friends, a fellow Guardian! Heâ€"

"Are you referring to your newest recruit?" She so savored the frightening silence that followed. It was sadistic, perhaps, but nonetheless, if there was something that Cupid _loved_, it was strolling along two steps in front of everyone else. She could imagine it: the group looking to one another with discomfiture, already assuming the worst. Really now. She scoffed. It wasn't as though she shipped their friend off to his doom. No, Jack Frost had managed to do that all by himself.

Bunny's voice, however, managed to ruin the previous visage. "Oh, _now_ she stops with the rhymesâ€|"

She giggled though the faulty resonances made it appear more as a malicious cackle than anything else. "I'd stop if your reactions to them weren't so amusing."

Cupid could almost hear the little growls coming from the Easter Bunny, teeth bared and ready to throttle her. "Why youâ€" "

"What do you know about Jack and this other boy?" Toothiana, Cupid surmised, seemed to chase the question to no bounds, furiously beating her feathery wings towards the wrong path. Was it perhaps due to the brief attraction she held to the Guardian of Fun?

'_Funny,'_ Cupid thought. '_I thought that waned months ago.'_ Still, the heart of a woman holds an ocean of secrets. So she may as well be straight with her; it was the least she could do: "Nothing that your voracious ears will hear from me." The affronted gasp that followed did nothing to soften her disposition.

"Huh, from flowery songs to blunt rejections. Change of heart, Cupid?" Oh how she did miss the _absence_ of Aster's dry wit.

Fortunately, she could weave something even more grating. She leaned back against her chair, propping her elbow onto the arm rest and began: "People are constantly evolving, so why not timeless beings like us? Time is paradoxicalâ€"it is based on truth and in perception which is often skewed. So for us that lack its logical and pathological effect, are we fixated on the continuity of the stagnant? Has eternity eroded that ability completely? And what is eternity butâ€" "

There was a frustrated growl from the other end and the woman had to stop and grin at how jumpy Bunnymund had gotten over the years. He would usually at least _attempt_ to follow her for a few moments. "Listen Cupid. I know your game: ya play around with words and get into our heads, forcin' digressions and delusions down our throats and then ya leave us to choke on 'em. Well it's not goin' to work this time." She bit back the obvious retort of: _"Really now?"_ _ and allowed him to finish. She supposed she owed him that as well. "What do ya know about Jack Frost and that boy he's withâ€" "

"Jamie Bennett's babysitter!" Oh? So Toothiana was familiar with the Haddock boy?

"Yeahâ€"the Bennett babysitter," Bunnymund finished with some hesitancy at the title. Cupid shook her head; no, they have no idea who this other boy is. It was a little tragic how Guardians lost connection with so many lost and confused souls who still needed to preserve their faith, needed lessons and morals to guide them, and needed comfort in times of fearâ€"all due to time.

She was taken from her thoughts as North's voice gently pleaded, "Cupid, you have to give us an answer."

It was silent once again as the woman shook pointless thoughts from her head, hoping they would drift off like falling suns through each day. Being too serious when one was separated from time and traversed down a separate path from mortal soulsâ€"such things paved roads to hells worse than insanity.

She was thankful for the short interruption. "If nothin', ya can at least tell us how deep their relationship goes," Bunny muttered.

Cupid laughed, casting away her thoughts like bad memories stuffed messily into shoeboxes and shoved into dusty little corners to be forgottenâ€"as it should! Her attention was turned towards teasing now, something she found herself quite good at. "Pfft, why Bunnyâ€"you yourself can reveal the '_depth' _of their 'relationship', can't you?"

There was suspicion and hesitancy in Tooth's voice as Cupid strained her ears to catch her words: "Bunny, what is sheâ€"

"NOTHIN'." Cupid was delightfully startled at the outburst. The Guardian of Hope was speaking lowly now, probably so the others couldn't hear andâ€"was Bunny _pleading?_ "Okay sheila, ya better not even think about bringin' _that_ up again." Yes, there was definitely a silent plea in that unspoken threat.

Grinning to no one but webs and shadows, Cupid reclined on her chair. "Alasâ€"old traditions are left to rot in the mud of time. I guess some of us do change. Stillâ€"we made a pretty good team back then, didn't we?" And they did, whether E. Aster Bunnymund would admit it or not.

Cupid could barely contain the mania as a confused, "Uh, Bunnyâ€"?" was picked up by the receiver from the Easter Bunny's dear companions.

"CUPID." It was a very long time since she last heard her name hissed in such a fashion. Bunnymund had definitely been an amusing partner.

"Oh, what a frenzy it wasâ€"had you maintained your role after the Byzantine fall, you wouldn't have to come looking for little 'ol me just to know the howâ€"far_ Jack may have gotten with the boy. Surely from that, you can at least make a guess to the nature of their interactions." Cupid didn't stop her bout of laughter at that; there was really no use for it. It was always such a joy to the sadistic when other's embarrassing pasts were brought to light.

"That'sâ€"I don'tâ€" Had she really reduced Bunny to stuttering? Perhaps some things in the past were more shameful than she realized. The grin on her lips lost its vibrancy, as though a crack had marred what was once whole. It was a peculiar thing to realize that although infinity belonged to the undying, emotions still owned the soulâ€"

(or what was left of it).

"Bunny," North whispered and was fortunately caught by Cupid's alert ears. "Remember what you said." Yes, Cupid was very good at distracting as well. Teasing and such went hand-in-hand. North seemed quite adept at evading her traps, however. No, she wasn't quite as disappointed or annoyed. Challenges and thrills sparked a glimmer of colorâ€"a burst of life in this trap she had unavoidably fallen into for the past millennia and more.

"Ahâ€" yeah." Bunny seemed to recover hastily, eager to preserve his honor. "That was a long time ago, Cupid. You know I don' mess with love."

It was faint, but there was a slight quiver in her actions, an unconscious hesitancy taken from an unintended reminder. "Indeed it was." Ghosts, wisps, and silhouettes closed in on her mind, the colors draining and twisting the images; it was horrible and it composed the very essence of her existence. "And indeed you shouldn't." And suddenly, her game wasn't as fun anymore, bitter like a cheated victory. Maybe it was time to end it; the hour was well into the night and she felt suddenly weighted with lethargy sinking into her bones. "Well as grand as it is to hear from the esteemed Guardians, I am a very busy woman you know. So I'm afraid that I mustâ€"

"Wait!" It was Toothiana again, her voice fraught with alarm and distress. "You haven't told us anything about Jack! He's our friend and it's our duty to help him!"

Cupid willed away the flare of anger, budding to burst in fury. "It's his business who he'll fall in love with; no one else's," she replied curtly. This was her jurisdiction, this was her duty, this was her burden. "Not even mineâ€" She put down the phone, silencing the outrage and pleas that were sure to follow. Yes, it was her burdenâ€"but Cupid vowed to never intervene. She sighed, will faltering but words unwavering, echoing in loneliness that could not escape her webs. "I'm not Carpathiaâ€"not anymoreâ€"

Not after centuries' toil that birthed chaos and decimation from her trembling hands as they pitifully tried and tried again to rebuild and recover what was gone. What became of budding romances that she tentatively tended, lovingly lavished and painfully protected had perverted to bitterness and lost chances. And when they ended, she had nothing to bury in the magnificent epitaph, Love's Domain. They became nothing more than a mere memory of her failures, the fruit of her good intentions that paved the wicked path to its own empty grave.

She ran a hand through her hair, her breath falling from her lips as listless eyes bore on into oblivion; the world condensed about her, hazy like illusions and nightmares, loud, blaringly so, like thousands of voices whining, crying, exalting, damning, cooing, whispering, and shrieking in the throes of passion all at once. It was nothing more than reflections, she knew, refracted from beams of sun and moon and distorted words reverberating in the wind. They pulsed in her blood; oxygen, it was. Without it, she would not be. Love kept her alive, no matter what grotesque form it took: they were all the same tales, each one parading about in a painted mask.

But not this one.

The voice whispered incessantly, enthralling and soothing like a familiar lullaby in lonely silence. And for the first time in a long time, Cupid wasn't sure what to believe.

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The Guardian of Hope shook his head, fear looming in transparency and casting shadows to blind those who have fallen under its hold. "This

is badâ€| " Panic consumed like downpours, torrents flooding truth while reality floated adrift to distant horizons, beyond visibility, beyond reach.

The large and comforting weight of North's hand on his shoulder did little to alleviate the turmoil. "It is not so bad, Bunny. Perhaps if we pay personal visitâ€"

"No, didn't ya hear her?" Bunny forced a laugh, the sound becoming strangled and apprehensive. "She likes to think she's good at keepin' secretsâ€|but if I know anythin' about Cupid, it's that she _loves _to talkâ€|" There might have been a shadow of nostalgia in his tone, but it was wholly overtaken by a foreboding eclipse of what is to come. The Guardian of Hope sighed. "Jack's fallin' in love and Cupid decided to back off."

Though Toothiana predicted the situation as such, part of her resignation was flecked with a gnawing worry at the foreboding sense that raked apprehension through her body at Bunny's words. "That part about Cupidâ€|what does it mean?"

His gaze lingered on the phone, as if receiving more and more riddles from the sardonic cynicâ€"each one as confounding and deceptively nonsensical as the next, each underlying the slightest grains of this "truth" that she so adored. Just searching through his interactions with her centuries ago provided him with enough insight to at least grasp a single spider-silk strand to hang on to. "It can mean either or both things: it's serious and she's afraid of messin' it up."

The lost look in Sandy's eyes that clearly read, "What are we going to do?" needn't his Dreamsand to voice the question that rooted itself in their minds with prickly thorns.

North's eyes lingered on a tall and magnificent grandfather clock, ticking away in oblivious merriment, unknowing of the destinies it heralded and the catastrophes it birthed; blooming and withering, it marched forward with each cycling swing of the pendulum. The Guardian of Wonder could only break away from its hold and turn to Toothiana, a grave tint in cloudy orbs. "If you are right and this boy can see Jackâ€|then we do not have much time." Yet the ring as the hour tolled revealed a half-truth and a covert possibility that owed itself to the recollection of a single bell.

****Fickle Fate****

It was breaking through the waves of slumber, rising back from the depths of inky illusions and whispered wishes, the blossoming of consciousness as spears of light pierced through the haze and fog of morning's welcome. Dawn had aged gracefully, nearing day's half-life, though its busiest hour had instead harbored a tranquility in the world that owed itself to the hallucinatory influence of sleep to the groggy mindâ€"soft and cozy like the sheets the Winter Guardian drowned in, warm and still like the hand atop hisâ€"

And it was that thought that effectively ended the peace of the morningâ€"at least in Jack's mind.

Eyes of ice darted to his slumbering partner, breathing quietly in steady pace: a good indication of sleep's hold over the human teen. There was a fragile veil of serenity that draped itself over his

form. Lashes flitted softly, a butterfly's dance as the remnants of a dream or a memory sang soothingly to his mind, expression bare of any indication to the reverie's implication, dry lips parted (_so, so, so very temptingly, alluringly closeâ€"),_ and fingers still curled around the Guardian's palm: an innocent gesture, unconscious and unwitting to its significance and how it made the Winter Spirit's heart lurch and somersault from its simple touch.

It was a nervous silence now, whether it stemmed from the breaching thoughts of how Hiccup would react to such a display (despite him unknowingly initiating the contact) or how he would have to explain to the teen why he hadn't moved his hand away.

So Jack at least tried to cover the latter: he would feign sleep until the brunet joined him in the waking world.

However, staying still was something that Jack didn't really pride himself in his abilities; he was the Guardian of _Fun_, and watching and waiting wasn't what his job called for. Still, he steeled himself in his endeavors as that grating voice in his head traitorously enticed him to follow through the act: after all, this may be one of the few chances he'd get to see how Hiccup would react to a romantic situation with him!

Jack muffled a groan. He couldn't believe he just thought of this as _'romantic.'_

It was holding hands after all. People did that all the time. Kids held their parents' hands in times of fear, kids held their siblings' hands in guidance, kids held their friends' hands in times of need, kids held hands when they were at that shy-crush stageâ€|and teens held hands for the same reason; teens held hands on their first date, teens held hands in public and in privacy, teens held hands when their hearts thudded just a tempo quicker when their fingers intertwined and their eyes locked; adults held hands when they knew that terrifying and wonderful emotion that squeezed their hearts was love, and they held hands when they grew old and grey, too afraid to let go. People held hands all the timeâ€"but the gesture retained the same sentiment behind the interlocking of fingers and the pressing of palms.

It was love and the want of it.

His pulse quickened and Jack sighed a soft praise at the small blessing that his palms lacked the ability to sweat. He was sure that if he did, Hiccup's hand would slide off his from the strange (and giddy) sensation that fluttered like sparrows in his stomach. The Guardian of Winter resigned himself to the outcome, no matter what it would be. If Hiccup freaked out, so be it. If Hiccup's eyes widened and that cute little blush of his would stain his perfectly freckled face, then so be it. If Hiccup stretched a bit and then proceeded to roll awayâ€"

There was no denying the incredulity and indignation in Jack's face as he balked at the _nerve of it all _whilst Hiccup turned his back to him.

The brunet made a small noise of contentment as Jack stayed frozen in place, mind decidedly not liking what just happened and was currently refusing to register it. A very childish part in his brain retorted

that the situation was unfairâ€"especially since he behaved quietly and was good. He should've gotten his treat, shouldn't he?

And so it was perhaps that mentality that led the esteemed Harbinger of Winter to latch his arms around Hiccup's lithe figure and bury his head at the crook of the teen's neck. From that action, Jack decidedly liked Hiccup's scent. Beneath the laundry detergent smell that enveloped his house, there was a faint aroma that lingered there, reminiscent of ancient forest airs and the spray of the ocean.

His face heated up as his brain finally caught up with his thoughts.

For Hiccup, he had woken up to worse: a glass of freezing water to his face on a cold, winter's night (it was important, they said; it couldn't wait, they said) or a cat pouncing onâ€|certain sensitive anatomies out of excitement to see his best friend awake after the accident, or being poked to bruising-point by the Bennett children. This was an improvement at least. Stillâ€|"Ngghhhâ€|Jackâ€|let goâ€|you're cold." Because, honestly, although Hiccup had grown up with nine months of snow and hail the other three throughout the year, Jack's body temperatureâ€|seemed to drop as of late.

That, or perhaps Hiccup was just adjusting to the milder weather of North America.

It was definitely more comfortable in this position, so Jack had to curtly reply "No." Plus, he could hear the precious little heartbeat that thrummed in quickened tempo within the other boy's chest and he had to say that the opportunity to hear its metronome was too scarce to pass up.

Meanwhile, Hiccup nearly sputtered at the obstinate reply. After a short trial of wriggling about to loosen the Guardian's grip, the teen could only sigh as the arms around him constricted his breathing. "Is this how it's going to be from now on?"

"Hn. Maybe." Jack grinned against Hiccup's shoulder and wondered if he felt it. 'Hopefully.'

"Ughâ€|I seriously need to get you a teddy bearâ€|or somethingâ€|" It took a while, but the teen finally managed to taste freedom, out of Jack's grip. "Because I'm not particularly interested in filling that position."

There was a wicked little grin on Jack's face and he was almost glad that Hiccup couldn't see it. "Then what position does interest you?"

If Hiccup detected the borderline-flirtatious nature of the question, his tone didn't show it. "The one where I don't get squeezed to death before I eat breakfast?" No, what betrayed him was the tinge of pink on his cheeks that the teen silently hoped Jack didn't see.

(The teen wasn't so fortunate.)

"Hmmâ€|you're rightâ€|" Jack stretched languidly on the bed, disentangling himself from the sheets, mood further brightened by the cute display so early from waking. "You should eat breakfast

firstâ€|then there'll actually be something of you to squeeze." He laughed as Hiccup huffed, blush more prevalent as it spread across his face and to the tips of his ears.

"Ha-ha-ha, very funny," the teen drawled, rolling his eyes as he yanked the sheets out from under the Guardian. He stood up and at least attempted to arrange his side of the bed before shaking his head and leaving it as a comfy mess.

The smile on his lips grew content as Jack watched Hiccup prepare for the day. "Thanks, I'll be here all week!" Love was a sadist, he was starting to recognize. Because there shouldn't really be a reason for Jack to feel happyâ€|plainly and simply _happy_â€|just doing something like being with Hiccup as the day started.

It was ordinary and did ordinary ever really feel this wonderful? Perhaps love was a good amplifier.

(Of good feelings and bad?)

"On my bed?" Hiccup ducked behind the wardrobe's doors to change, mentally questioning of Toothless's presence. Or lack thereof. Cats did have that tendency, didn't they? They strayed after given food and shelter and every other sort of necessity, appearing and disappearing on a whim. It was a bit harder to gain their loyalty and even harder to gain their love. It was a good thing that Hiccup earned both.

"If you'll have me." Hiccup peeked out from the door, dressed for the day, and shot a bland look at the smug-posed Winter Spirit on his bed.

The teen rolled his eyes, but the action was not without a smidge of affection. "Not like I can ask you to leave." He glanced at the clock and frowned, finding that he had woken up much later than he intended. Well, yesterday had been quiteâ€|something. Plus, although Hiccup couldn't remember it, he must've had some crazy-weird dream because he felt absolutely _exhausted_ the moment ice-cold limbs attached themselves to his torso. Opening his bedroom door, the teen listened to the eerily silent house for a moment, ears straining against the hum of nothingness. "Huhâ€|_Dad_? _Dad_!" Only a small resonance replied. He walked to the stairs and leaned against the banister, finding his father's work boots gone and coat closet ajar down below. "Hmâ€|he must've left already."

"He left a note too." Hiccup denied that he jumped at the sound of Jack's voice just a _tad bit_ too close behind him. Not like that would get the Ice Spirit to stop snickering.

"What? Lemme see that." He ignored Jack's amusement and snatched the paper from the Ice Spirit's shadowy grasp. He scanned the page written in his native tongue as it provided guidelines for the day's agenda.

_Hikke, _

Left for work early today. I need you to pick up some things at the store. List is on the back. Also, you start school tomorrow so get whatever you need as well.

Be good and try to stay away from trouble.

â€”_Dad_

Irritation bubbled but was quickly released as a resigned breath. "â€”okay, really? I told him we should've bought groceries a week ago." His eyes wandered to the indistinct being beside him, undoubtedly amused at the little chore. '_And staying away from trouble is harder than it should beâ€”especially when 'trouble' is literally following you around.'_

Said '_trouble'_ grinned. "I thought you were 'grounded'?" Because while staying inside all day with Hiccup would've been fine, he much preferred going out and having another one of their little "adventures." One way or anotherâ€”they brought them just a little bit closerâ€”

Jack stopped that thought right there. Now really wasn't the time to be thinking about it.

"So did I...well, it's no amnesty, but it's better than staying inside all day." The teen hummed, eyeing the list and his lips promptly fell to a frown. And how did his father expect him to carry all that by himself? Shrugging, he pocketed the paper and started downstairs.

And judging by the frosty gust emanating from behind, Jack decided to join him.

The Guardian wondered of what today would bring, smiling to himself as Hiccup put on his boots and unlocked the door. "Maybe the term 'grounded' got lost in translation?"

Hiccup rolled his eyes as the sound of the Ice Spirit's laughter, a child's joy on the first flurry of winter, expelled the loneliness of the house. His expression softened as a certain thought followed him while he looked to the snow, and the world's colors went whiteâ€”

Now that he could hear it clearly, he never noticed how nice Jack's voice sounded.

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"So how did you end up following me?"

It was a simple question, sure. But that didn't mean it warranted a simple answerâ€”that is, if Hiccup actually expected Jack to fork over the whole truth. Stealing a glance at his companion (not that stealth was really necessary since the teen couldn't see him in the first place. Then again, maybe Hiccup had that jumpy sort of effect on himâ€”) he tried not to concentrate on those green eyes glimmering with curiosity and a tint of annoyanceâ€”

(and if he dared to think, maybe even a drop of satisfaction?)

So Jack threw his head back in a careless laugh, floating above the waves of people that flooded from the opposite direction (because even after centuries of it, the fact that he was a mere phantom overlooked by an endless tide of faces still made a small part of him

ache with loneliness). "Because I'm bored and you're hopeless without me?" but he grinned anyways because now wasn't the time to think about thatâ€"not when there was someone with him, anchoring him to sanity and guiding him back to solace.

Hiccup rolled his eyes, entirely unaware of it all. "Yeah, sure."

(Perhaps, perhaps not.)

The Guardian eyed the teen as he drew out his cell phone and tucked the device between his ear and shoulder. Jack frowned; wasn't this their special-alone time? And yes, Jack did sequentially blanch at the thought before mourning of his foregone pride. Still, if Hiccup planned on taking a call while they were together, Jack at least wanted to know for what purpose. "What are you doing?"

(It wasn't as though the Winter Spirit was trying to monopolize his timeâ€|or anythingâ€|)

Hiccup chuckled. "Making sure I don't look like I'm crazy when I talk to you?" He shot Jack a snarky grin, one that read, _'What did you think I was doing? Blowing you off?'_

Jack reddened at the latter thought. Still, "Ohh, smart thinking there." Well, the Guardian supposed that pretending to be on a call would solve the issue. But did that make them farther away than was necessary?

Then again, that was what they wereâ€"a spirit of winter and iceâ€|and a teenage boy. And it suddenly seemed like there was a whole universe of differences between them instead of a few feet of snow and air. Hiccup's gaze settled on his eyes, irises of seasons he couldn't reach meeting with his own, and there was something absolutely enchanting about them that everything else that mattered earlier sunk below the bright black of the brunet's pupils. "You okay?" and phone or not, Hiccup was looking right at him, and even though those curious and concerned orbs cringed as someone passed right through Jack, maybe it was okay that there _were_ entire galaxies that separated themâ€|because at least in _their_ little world, there was just the two of them.

"Yeah." And the Guardian landed on his feet, beside his companion with a shaky grin. As if knowingly so, Hiccup smiled back. So it was just themâ€"walking side by side, their elbows almost touching as they dug their hands into jacket pockets and exhaled the remains of solitude into the lively town air. It was commonplace, almost dull, but that was the closest Jack had ever felt to being normal in the longest time.

Hiccup shivered as the sky clouded, taints of white crossing the horizons to seal against the melting radiance. Maybe things were getting a bit colder in Burgess. "So, not that there's anything wrong with uhâ€|this or anythingâ€|but you're not busy or needed anywhere?" He took a quick glimpse at Jack as the temperature dropped. Just a bit.

"No, not really. Aw, you're not trying to get rid of me yet, are you?" Jack feigned offense. Still, he couldn't pretend that he was just a little hurt at the insinuation. Just a little.

"Again, even if I wanted to, I doubt I could." Hiccup was sure to at least imply to the Ice Spirit that he was kidding. Mostly. "No, it's just thatâ€¦well, you're _Jack Frost_. And Iâ€¦ah, well I'm _me_. Can't be too thrilling hanging around here." And it was true. Gobber had once even joked that he was stunned that Toothless stuck around for so long.

There was a strange need to reassure the teen that he wouldn't trade his time with him for the world because lately, time with Hiccup _became _his worldâ€”but he stamped down that incredibly mortifying thought at once. So instead, little bursts of them bubbled up at once; not a good thing when trying to talk.

'_Are you kidding?_' "Iâ€”uhm, well hey, I need a vacation too you know! Plusâ€¦" '_Being with youâ€¦_' "The fun we had wasn't exactly _normal_, andâ€¦" '_It makes me feel happyâ€¦_' "_Sometimesâ€¦normal's nice. I haven't had normal in a long timeâ€¦" '_And it's not so lonely anymore.' _Jack blinked and flushed an unhealthy shade of red. Did those incredibly embarrassing thoughts just jump from his brain, poisoning his temperament to that of a lovelorn, affection-starved sap?

He believed so.

Hiccup snickered. "Normal, huh? Well I guess you don't know me at all."

"Oh? What else is there to you, _Hikke_?" Jack was really starting to like that nickname variation; it was obvious, however, that Hiccup wasn't. "Aside from being extraordinarily accident-prone?"

Scoffing, head held high in the air, the unfortunate brunet failed to notice a particularlyâ€¦reflective patch of pavement his foot was inches away from stepping upon. "Hey, I am _not_â€”" And there went Hiccupâ€”

â€”falling straight into Jack's arms. And the poor teen tried so hard not to squeak when an amused (_and husky) _voice whispered into his ear: "Watch the ice."

Hiccup broke free far too fast for the Winter Spirit's liking, but _that_ reaction was definitely worth it.

(Forget the odd looks here and there from a few townsfolk.)

The teen huffed and once again attempted to conceal the splash of red painted across his cheeks, angry little glances to Jack's direction causing the faint flare of embarrassment in viridian orbs more apparent. "You did that on purpose," he accused with an inevitable scowl (wellâ€¦pout, really).

Jack stifled a chuckle. "Me? Why I would _neverâ€”okay, I might." Jack couldn't lie to such an adorably flustered (irritated) face like that. "Honestly though, that was neither intentional, nor directly, my fault."

"Right." Hiccup rolled his eyes. "Well, I don't think it's really me being attracted to danger, but more like the other way around." He winced as a particularlyâ€¦unfavorable memory surfaced, souring the

atmosphere. The cold around him didn't seem so brisk anymore, bitter like mistakes that cannot be undone, unsympathetic like necessary regrets.

Jack barked out a laugh, strained and nervous. "You don't sayâ€|"

"Yeahâ€|" And Hiccup wasn't looking at him anymore and although Jack only met the teen for a short period of time, the Guardian would bet anything that the brunet was looking off to the distance again, that same troubled look on his faceâ€"the one where he'd form this little wrinkle in his brow even though he's too young to be forming those serious lines, his eyes would darken a shade and the shine in them would dull as his mind replayed some near-forgotten scene over and over again (but he really couldn't let those memories go, not even if he wanted to), his mouth would form this tight line that came from years of composing himself as he learned not to cry in front of others as a kid, and something profound and excruciating would embed itself to his heart like a thorn sunken too deep in the bleeding flesh to remove without leaving permanent scars.

Jack didn't like that look. "Anythingâ€|major or interesting that you'd like to share?" It meant that Hiccup was thinking too much about something he didn't like, something that Jack couldn't do anything about, and something that made Jack have trouble bringing a smile back to the other boy's face.

He looked back the Guardian, a hollow look of nonchalance on his face. "Hmâ€|compound fracture on my left leg when I went snowboarding." The explanation was simple enough but there was something thereâ€"a shift in the other's tone, the slight quiver in the atmosphere as they walked along, past bustling stores and hurried people rushing through life, thoughts, hopes, and reminiscences wafting through the city' smoke and chatter.

It was Jack who winced this time. "Ouch." Just a glance to his side and he could just imagine what kind of damage that could do to Hiccup's frail frame. "But hey! You're still pretty amazing at it, so it couldn't have been that bad." He chuckled, delighted that the flattery broke off some of the other boy's tension, the brunet's posture and stride seeming to relax. And perhaps that's another reason why he liked Hiccup so muchâ€|the teen was stronger than he appeared.

(Inside and out.)

A hum passed his lips as Hiccup tried to redirect his focus on at least a humorous note. "No, I guess not. The avalanche that caused it, however, wasn't much fun either." He tried for a wry smile, but that promptly went to hell at the Ice Spirit's reaction.

"_What_?" Hiccup didn't need to see to know that Jack was currently donning a shocked and most-likely-horror-struck expression. What a lovely accessory to go with this winter seasonâ€|

The teen sighed, giving the Ice Spirit a helpless look; not much could be done now. "Well what can I say other than I was young, stupid, and willing to risk a lot of things to fit in?"

"Like the explanation of why, how, and what?" It wasn't like Jack was

prying per seâ€¦it was more like he was _concerned_â€¦over a past eventâ€¦that he was trying to wheedle information out of from the teen he was so keen on getting to know. "Well, if you know, you feel up to talking about it." He scratched the back of his neck sheepishly, aware of the dry look Hiccup subtly shot in his direction.

He held the phone close and rested his other hand within the confines of his jacket pocket. "Nah, it's fine really. I got over it even though my leg still gives me trouble from time to time. For the 'why', I guess it was becauseâ€¦" His steps slowed and something like pain shot phantom tremors down his body. "I wanted to be like the other guys in my hometownâ€¦the kind that my dad kind of always wanted me to be. He never said that out loud, but you know, with a guy like my dad and with a fishbone for a son like me, and him saying that maybe I should start acting like the other guys at Berkâ€¦i-it was stupid. I know that now. But I guess some life-lessons are more painful than others." There might've been a pathetic effort at a laugh that Hiccup intended to follow up with the last sentence, but between the despair of the past and the foolishness of it all now, the empty sound got lodged in his throat and forcing it out would no doubt just make the boy choke on nostalgia.

There was a tightening in his chest and Jack suddenly found his mouth dry and his brain, thoughts detached from conscious hold, spewing word vomit. "You're right and I guess life works in mysterious ways, huh? Not all of them very pleasant, mind you." Jack didn't know what he was really sayingâ€¦all he knew was that he absolutely _had_ to get that miserable look off Hiccup's face. "Andâ€¦uhm, I'm glad that you realized that! I mean, why be someone else when you're perfect the way you are?" '_Aaaand why is all of that being said out loud? '_

"Iâ€¦ah, uhmâ€¦t-thanks..." Jack's only solace was the fact that Hiccup's radiant blush returned along with some stuttering and that made the Ice Spirit forget his earlier faux pas and exchange it for the colossal social blunder of crushing the red-faced teen to his chest and never letting go.

Yes, the Guardian of Fun really did find the freckled brunet extremely cute. He thought he already covered that with his mortified brain. But he couldn't really focus on that nowâ€¦not while he still wanted some questions answered.

There was a casual shrug and Hiccup continued, the rouge fading to a dull pink. "A-again, I was young and stupid. As for the 'how'â€¦ever heard of the 'Green Death'?"

Jack shot him a bland look. "Do I have to answer that?" Though Hiccup couldn't possibly witness it, he hoped his tone of voice provided the other boy the correct imagery.

"Right. Well, it's famous in Berk for being practically the most insane mountain on that side of the planet." Hiccup bit his lip, images evoking a chill that never seemed to fade, as though a part of the mountain's atmosphere still gripped the fringes of his soul. "Big doesn't even begin to describe this death-trap; it's riddled with crags, spires, and gorges. It's impossibly steep and even during the months when it doesn't snow on Berk, it's still hazardous to climb because of all the hail and ice that breaks up the ground."

"Wait, why is it called the 'Green Death'? I can't imagine much 'green' in a place like that." Yes, Jack was quite curious as well. Offhanded little details seemed to do that.

Hiccup snorted. "Same reason why 'Greenland' has its name."*

"Ahâ€|" Jack should've known. A nice cemetery for tourists for sure. "And you boarded down said death-trap?"

There was a careless shrug of the shoulders before Hiccup replied, "Pretty much, yeah."

He expected it, but what Jack failed to foresee was his outburst: "What were you thinking!" Because it definitely wasn't everyday that Jack Frost, Guardian of _Fun,_ did the reprimanding.

Hiccup just kept walking forward, eyes fixed on something or nothing up ahead. "To be honest, I really wasn't. I wasn't the strongest or the most bull-headedâ€|but I was fast. That was something I had that the others didn't." The sidewalk was mostly empty now, occupied only by vacated shops, closed stores, and two traveling teens. Christmas lights flickered here and there, but the holiday cheer succumbed to its dormant state for another eleven months.

Jack sighed. "So what, you thought you could outrun _Death_?"

"Run?" There was a weak laugh from Hiccup at that. "Not a chanceâ€|board? Maybeâ€|"at least back then I thought it was possible."

'_Then?' _ There was an uneasy feeling at the pit of Jack's stomach. "How old were you?"

"Thirteen," he replied simply.

The Winter Spirit flinched. "Hard lesson to learn when you're at that ageâ€|"

"Hehâ€|yeah. But still, going through the terror, being stuck in limbo between knowing you're dead when your dad can't find you and knowing that you're dead when he does, and the time spent at rehabâ€|it gave me time for myselfâ€|and time to learn." Those were the hardest timesâ€|but some things needed to break in order to properly heal. And in those times, Hiccup realized that maybe he was more broken than he thought he was; at least, his father was finally able to see it and help him back up on his feetâ€|"with some help of course. It turned out that he really did have people he could trust in Berk and not just a moody feline that ended up becoming his best friend.

Jack, however, was more drawn to a certain phrase that demanded explanation: "What do you mean 'when your dad can't find you'?"

Hiccup gave him a wry smile. Little detailsâ€|"Avalanche, remember? Yeah, should've known really. Green Death is known for having one at least a couple of times every winter. I just chose the wrong day."

Jack's heart almost stopped. "You nearly died?"

His eyes were downcast, focusing on the gravel and snow that accompanied every step he took. "It crossed my mind. But it was a loose snow avalanche, probably from all the activity and commotion as the snow built up from the earlier weeks." It absolutely grated on Jack's nerves that Hiccup just seemed so bent on keeping the casual air around them.

Hypocritically, the Guardian despaired at evoking a true reaction from Hiccup at the memory. "Butâ€|your legâ€|" he started feebly.

And that look was backâ€|the one Jack didn't like. "I don't remember much other than a lot of painâ€|and a lot of white. I was apparently partially buried under a gullyâ€|if it wasn't for Toothlessâ€|"

Now that justified an interruption. "Toothless?" There was something that Jamie had told him the day he met Hiccup about the felineâ€|

There was a fragile little smile on Hiccup's lips but his eyes recovered that vibrancy he lost mid-way during their little trek down Memory Lane, Burgess. "Yeahâ€|my dad didn't welcome the fact that I took in a stray but he definitely warmed up to him after he found me."

"Wait, that little fur ballâ€|saved your life?" Now it was all coming back to himâ€|

The small upturn on his lips evolved to a full-blown grin and Jack silently exalted the furred demon while maintaining a pinch of jealousy at the feline for being able to brighten the teen with just a simple mention. "Yup. Norwegian Forests are prized huntersâ€|at least their ancestors were. He found me not too long after the snow stabilized." It seemed as though pleasant memories were fleeting in Hiccup's mind; not long after, the remnants of hurt and fear marred his smile. "It was a good thing my dad was already on his way up the mountain before the avalancheâ€|Gobber overheard something the twins said and told him right away. They formed a search party to look for me. It was only by luck that I decided to take Toothless up there with me that day. It was even luckier that my dad trusted him to lead them to where I was." And it was then that Jack understood why the damn creature was so edgy around him and so protective of Hiccup.

"Yeahâ€|" Jack croaked. He quickly cleared it away with a cough. "Lady Luck was definitely on your side. As fickle as she is."

There was perhaps a lapse of silence, a small break in the drift of memoirs and melancholy. A time for illusions to fade and sinkâ€| time to think that perhaps the world wasn't so bad then and isn't now, and time to let wayward dreamers be before imminent discord pulls them under far too deep for sunlight to even reach.

It was Hiccup that broke through the calm. "You know, winter's awfully fickle too."

"What?" Jack very nearly gasped in resentment. "Am not!" Really? The nerve of that guy!

Hiccup at least had the decency to mask his grin; well, as long as he wasn't in a sullen moodâ€Jack would be okay with it. Even if it was at his expense. "I meanâ€the variations of you: in old myths, you weren't exactly safe to hang aroundâ€every time I think about the old legends of J  rkul, I think of that avalanche and what could've happenedâ€but when I think of you, Iâ€" And Hiccup suddenly looked as though he said something he really didn't want to say out loud. Jack was unexpectedly delighted to know that he wasn't the only one with that issue. "Iâ€" Delightfulness levels rose as Hiccup's trademark blush blossomed like clockwork.

And was it really a crime that Jack was very, very hopeful right now?
"Yeahâ€¦?"

And then Hiccup stopped walking and looked right past Jack and for a moment, his heart dropped to his stomach at the thought of the teen looking at him like all the others didâ€”like he wasn't there at all. But instead Hiccup said in a small voice, "â€”we're here. Uh, maybe we should change the subject. Now that, err, other people will be within hearing distance." Jack held back a breath of relief.

The Guardian turned and to his left, there it was â€”the market. He sighed and wondered why he didn't have perfect timing like that. He threw his hands up in temporary surrender. "Okay, fine. But don't think I'll forget where we left off!" Jack grinned as Hiccup flushed just a bit more.

Like hell he was going to forget that.

•

While Hiccup was sure that taking the Harbinger of Winter to the grocery store would have surely caused mass chaos (more than likely, starting from the frozen foods aisle), Jack, surprisingly remained quite well-behaved. Okay, yesâ€|there were a few incidents here and there regarding the frozen foods aisle (something to do with a turkey and a runaway, iced slab of pork) but that was a story for another day. But all in all, Jack helped him out, floating from row to row of merchandise to get the trip done as quickly as possible. In the end, they found everything.

And in the end, that became a huge problem.

"You sure you can carry all that?" Jack watched with slight amusement and slight worry as Hiccup performed a rather interesting balancing act with nearly a dozen grocery bags, plastic dangling from his arms and paper bags being hefted to his chest, towering close to the brunet's face.

"No clue!" Hiccup could barely see over the bags, but when did something like that stop him? "But I can try at least?" Jack proceeded to aid Hiccup's little 'try' as the bags wobbled and swayed from each uncertain step Hiccup took.

After saving an orange from popping out of the brimming paper of produce products, Jack was losing faith faster than he anticipated. "And you're sure you don't need any help?" They were garnering a few looks here and there from quite a few townspeople—mostly from concerned mothers and disapproving shakes to the head from the

elderly.

A small scoff emitted from behind the walking (or rather, stumbling) pile of groceries. "Even if I did, I doubt the crowds of people gaping over the floating bags of store products would do me much goodâ€|"

"Good point," Jack agreed. Still, it's not like he could just _leave_ Hiccup like that. And besides, he wanted to help. Sighing, he reached for an overloaded bag hanging by Hiccup's reddening hand, the plastic stretching to its near breaking-point. "Here, at least let me take half of thisâ€|"

"Uh, okay." The teen struggled for a moment to keep everything else steady while he loosened his grip on the bag. "Keep it close to my side though so no one can tell."

"A-all right." Jack walked close, one arm grasping the rather heavy bundle while Hiccup trudged along with the opposite grip beside him. And there was that odd thing againâ€|where the brunet's proximity seemed to stop his brain from operating correctly and kept his mouth from closing: "Wowâ€|so are we indirectly holding hands?"

There was a massive shuffle of plastic and paper and Jack swore he saw his life (well, after-life) flash before his eyes as the pile nearly toppled over him. Instead of that unborn disaster, he got an earful of choked amusement from Hiccup. "Please don't say that. If I laugh, I might drop everything."

This time, it was the Guardian's turn to scoff. "What, never held anyone's hand before?" There was something else accompanying the teen's glare, something that made Jack feel insanely pleased on the inside. "Hmâ€|your lips are sealed but that blush of yours says it all."

"Jack, I swear I'll kill you when we get home," the teen mumbled, fingers inching away from Jack's end of the grip.

"For aiding a friend in need? Gee, thanks," he joked. The Guardian narrowed his eyes as the teen leaned his head in an odd angle. "You know, you can put away your phone, Hiccup. Seriously, you're going to mangle your neck like that. Or break your phone. Whichever one is more costly."

Face flushed from exertion, the difficulty of carrying everything seemed to definitely take its toll, if the tired glare Jack received indicated anything. "So how will I explain talking to myself?"

"Hey, didn't you already learn that it doesn't matter what other people think of you?" He beamed childishly, even as the teen's stare grew murderously dark.

"â€|I may seriously kill you when we get home," he grumbled, easing away from the device, careful not to let anything spill.

"That's fineâ€|just lemme take that off your hands," he replied, impassive to the threat. Maneuvering towards the teen, he was careful not to let anything seem like it was being held by an invisible force while Hiccup quickly and awkwardly tucked his phone in his pocket.

Hiccup shook his head, groaning as a dull ache throbbed right by his pulse. "Aughâ€|my neck's soreâ€|" Did Jack detect a_ whine_ coming from the teen?

The Ice Spirit smirked. "See? Told you."

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This wasn't the strangest thing E. Aster Bunnymund had done with his life during the past centuries as a Guardian. However, preying on Jack Frost and his little "Mister" definitely reached the top of the ranks.

"Okay Baby Toothâ€|are you and Division One in position?" Toothiana headed this little mission along with her fairies, murmuring lowly to the two-way radio at the Pole's Observation Room. Yetis were constantly on watch, eyes droopy from lack of sleep as they observed the day-to-day mishaps and moral choices of children. It was creepyâ€|there wasn't an inkling of doubt about that. But how else was Santa supposed to form his list?

One certain camera was positioned at Main Street of Burgess; a glinting light from a corner television store to the screen indicated an affirmative. Bunny shook his head. It wasn't enough that North actually possessed fairy-sized equipment, but honestlyâ€|using his universal surveillance?

The Easter Bunny shook his head. '_No wonder Father Christmas always knows when you're up to no good.'_

The Tooth Fairy faced him, this time grinning with enthusiasm. "Great! Nowâ€|Jack's been neglecting his duties quite a bitâ€|maybe it's time for him to see that the world needs him!"

Bunnymund eyed her critically. "Ya sure this'll work? Frost's always been a bit of a slacker."

Tooth shook her head. "Bunny, you know that Jack loves his job and latelyâ€|well, lately, a whole lot of people aren't really getting that." Thatâ€|was actually a huge understatement. "Plus, how else are we supposed to get Jack to leave Burgess without causing a mess?"

Brow raised, the Guardian of Hope opened his mouth before he sighed. He did agree to oversee the procedures, no matter how little sense it made. '_Then again, Frost did always like the attentionâ€|'_ Well, whatever. He was just happy that no one dubbed it by any obscure codename yet.

There was more unintelligible (by anyone other than Toothiana at least) chirpings from the radio's speakers and from the large screen before them, the center display of Travis's TV's flickered to life.

"Yes!" Toothiana pumped a fist in the air, eyes swimming with anticipation. "Operation Weatherman is a-go!"

It took a lot of willpower for Bunnymund not to smack his forehead.

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Jack sighed, irritation starting to make him lose patience. "Are you really not talking to me just because you don't have your stupid phone on?"

Nearby, a boy on his bike nearly swerved right into a street lamp as television's speakers blared on full blast from within a shop. What was scarier was the channel it happened to turn to: the news.

"_is still under investigation. Up next: Global warming, according to experts, is believed to be the primary cause of the worldwide temperature increase and poor snowfall this winter season. Countries of the eastern hemisphere are affected most with the Americas receiving the least amount of change in weather patterns with respect to last year's data"

"I'm not _completely_ ignoring you" Hiccup continued, voice reduced to a mere cautious whisper as he walked on, thankful for whatever loud distraction that was.

The Guardian pouted, attention completely engrossed in his seemingly-sulking friend. "And why are you speaking so low? Speak up!" There seemed to be little to no room in Jack's world for a weather report.

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Toothiana bit her lip; they were approaching the store where Baby Tooth and the others resided and Jack still seemed more focused on the other boy than his surroundings. "Oh no" what if he doesn't notice?" The fairies could always create a diversion, but if any of them got caught by Jack, they'd be busted for sure.

"Huh" so that's him" Bunnymund eyed the younger teen as the camera zeroed in and mentally shrugged. Definitely lanky, but there was a certain appeal to him" Aster snapped from his daze, wondering where that thought erupted from. "Right then," he coughed. "Leave that to me."

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Hiccup rolled his eyes for the umpteenth time that day. "Well I have to go" oah!" Aaaand there went most of the groceries.

"Hiccup!" And there went Hiccup tumbling into Jack's arms" again. He frowned at the mess by their feet. It deepened as the Guardian eyed a rather deep pothole that he was absolutely _positive _wasn't there before. _'A hole that size and Hiccup would have fallen in it earlier this morning.'_ "Ah, you okay?" He steadied the boy to his feet, trying not to admire the cute little blush on the teen's freckled face too obviously.

(He had a feeling it was from holding Hiccup too long anyways.)

"Yeah" well, I saved the eggs at least" The brunet sighed. "Guess I shouldn't walk around if I can't even see my own two

feet."

"_scientists are still baffled by the mild weather reports from areas that normally receive several feet a week of snow_"

Smiling a bit too smugly, he caught the teen by the shoulders in a one-armed embrace. "Heh, I knew you'd be hopeless without me."

"_Sure_," Hiccup groused, still refusing to look the Ice Spirit in the eye.

"Not my fault you always need me to save you from falling," he retorted.

The teen scoffed, a light smile playing at his lips. "You call that 'saving'?"

Effectively catching the slight gesture, the Guardian gave him a good-natured nudge. "Hey! You're standing upright, aren't you?" Well, not anymore as Hiccup bent down to salvage whatever he could of the groceries. Jack, being the gentleman he was, stooped down to help him.

(Which meant piling the bags into Hiccup's arms while he discreetly chased after a few rolling cans of string beans, still mindful of onlookers.)

"My hero," the teen drawled sarcastically. The effect, however, was ruined by the one-legged little jig he used to keep the bags from slipping out from under his arms.

"Any time," Jack chuckled. He eyed one more parcel on the floor—the last of Hiccup's essential burdens—by the pothole's rim. "Here, let me—".

There was wide-eyed panic from the teen as the Winter Spirit moved towards its target. "It's okay, I don't—"no! I—"ah, haha, I'll take that, thanks." A nervous laugh trickled from the teen's lips, as he carefully lifted the bag with his boot (which impressively took some amount of skill, Jack admitted) and clumsily brought to his care.

Jack raised a brow. "Okay?" But his eyes narrowed as he caught something more peculiar than a nervous Hiccup (no, that was getting to be pretty regular to Jack). It was a flower in full blossom, its petals a vivid shade of lavender and leaves of lively green that contrasted heavily with the season of ice, death, and decay, sprouting impossibly from wire-thin cracks of concrete and human toil. "Huh—|"

At the same time, the television caught the teen's attention as he turned to the deafening report. "Huh—|hey Jack?"

"_experts now reveal new insight to this global dilemma—"_"

There was a sudden fizzle of static, a twisted turn of fate, before the displayed merchandise went black.

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Bunny nearly choked on his hot chocolate. He slammed down the mug as he watched the scene with confusion. "What's goin' on?"

Toothiana gasped. "I-I don't know!" Contacting her fairies furiously, the Tooth Fairy took a few deep breaths when she heard nothing but white noise on the other line. "Baby Tooth, do you copy? Baby Tooth! Are you there?" Trying to calm her frazzled heart, she looked to the monitor with outright terror, radio clutched close. "Ladies, whatâ€"where are they?"

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"_I really can't stay"_

The familiar tune resonated throughout the streets, causing the teen to tilt his head in confusion. It was an airing of a (late) Christmas special, judging by the timeless scenes of lights and colors falling away to snow and trees. '_But the tuneâ€'| '_Hiccup frowned, setting down the bags by his feet. "Is thatâ€|?"

"_**But baby, it's cold outside**_"

I've got to go away

**But baby, it's cold outside**"

Turning back to the store, Jack couldn't help but smile at the interesting find. "Well, well wellâ€|" And silently, he thanked Lady Luckâ€"wherever she was. "Lookie here, Hiccup! It's our song!"

"_This evening has been_"

**Been hoping that you'd drop by**"

So very nice"

A rather mollified flush graced the teen's cheeks as memories recurred from that heart-stopping incident in the shower. Not only had the Winter Guardian caught him _singing_, he caught him _singing_ and _naked_. "_I thought you didn't want to talk about _that_ incident anymore?" he groaned, face unquestionably pink.

"_I'll hold your hands, their just like ice_~" He ignored Hiccup's deadpan stare and shrugged. "Still like the song." He thought back to that night and grinned, eyes dancing with mirth and warmth. "C'mon, sing along!"

"_My mother will start to worry_"

Hiccup shot him the blandest stare he could muster. "I don't sing Jack." Butâ€|it was getting awfully difficult for him to keep the disgruntled faÃ§ade. Not when Jack started singing along, making an outright idiot of himself. '_An idiot with a really nice voiceâ€|'_ something extremely traitorous purred in his mind.

Jack winked. "_Beautiful, what's your hurry?"_ His grin widened as he took in Hiccup's bright blush; that was a view he didn't think he'd

ever get tired of. "Really? I'm pretty sure I heard you singing that night."

The teen shrugged, lips playing at a smirk. "Well, if you call that _singing_." Nope, his voice wasn't something he was particularly proud of. He shook his head, declining, and chose to rather listen as Jack sang along to the song that fit them just right.

"_My father will be pacing the floor_

**Listen to the fireplace roar**

And maybe it was a bit strange the way the melody made him relax into its tune, the way the memory made him smile at their pathetic attempts at rendering the song, and maybe it was the fact that it was a _good_ memory that brought so many good things that made winter not seem so desolate anymore that before Hiccup could really stop himself, his soft-spoken voice shakily joined in with snow-light rhythm. "_So really I better scurryâ€¦_"

For a moment, it was okay that Hiccup couldn't see him; the way the Winter Guardian's eyes looked at him with pure adoration would have probably confused the poor teen to no end. "_Beautiful, please don't hurry~_"

"_Well maybe just a half a drink more_

**Put some records on while I pour**

Jack couldn't possibly grin any wider as those viridian eyes darted away. "What happened to not singing?"

Hiccup scoffed, cheeks burning pink. "It's a catchy tune.

"_The neighbors might think_

**Baby, it's bad out there**

Say what's in this drink?

**No cabs to be had out there**

"_I wish I knew how,"_ he breathed gently, not entirely losing himself to the enthralling ambiance.

Jack smiled softly, catching Hiccup's self-conscious gaze. "_Your eyes are like starlight nowâ€¦_"

"_To break the spellâ€¦_" And for a moment, it did. The teen frowned. "Hey, waitâ€¦why am I singing the girl's part?"

Jack simply laughed.

"_**I'll take your hat, your hair looks swell**_

I ought to say no, no, no sir"

"_Mind if I move in closer?"_ And with a wolfish grin, the Guardian did.

Hiccup crossed his arms, unsuccessfully stifling a chuckle. "_At least I'm gonna say that I tried"__

The Winter Guardian pouted. _"What's the sense in hurting my pride?"_

Turning to Jack, a wan smile was his offered reply. _"I really can't stayâ€¦!"_

And Jack's was leaning in close and whispering, _"Baby, don't hold out~"__

"_**Ah, but it's cold outside**__!"_

There were a few stares, but Hiccup didn't really noticeâ€¦not with Jack singing along as they walked down the sidewalk, not with something almost _magical_ in the air between them. The teen decided to focus in on thatâ€¦it made his heart flutter like a caged bird, wings aching to taste the eternal blue, a bird of paradise seeking the warmth of the sun on its back gliding along the expanse of forest greens and velvety sapphires of the ocean. But it was so far away, anticipation growing, a yearning for something his mind couldn't name. It was bewildering, and even as the song ended, it remained at the forefront of his thoughts, a vexing puzzle.

But Jack knew what it was: a mirror of his own affections and the sensation of firelight sparking within him; it was possibly the dumbest thing he had ever done, but it was also the most wonderful. It was falling in love. The air chilled and frosty gales played with the locks of Hiccup's hair, a stray snowflake here and there kissing his cheek. Feather-light snow descended lightly as Jack unintentionally moved closer to Hiccup, Icarus flying closer to the sun. He hummed their song all the while, still trying to help the teen carry the bags.

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Within Travis's TV's, a few customers gawked at the surprising amount of cobwebs collecting on the displays. When told of this, the owner was quite mystified as well. They were all brand new, leftovers on sale from the Christmas rush.

What they failed to see was Division One, tangled within the threads of Fate.

After minutes of furious squirming to rid herself of the glittering strands of obsidian, Baby Tooth gasped as she watched Jack walk away with the human boy beside himâ€¦"

â€¦"_far too close for her liking._

Beating her wings feverishly, the sticky silks began to peel away from her feathers (or perhaps the feathers were peeling away from her?). She squeaked in victory as her wings met nothing but air and dust particles and made a mad dash to the front door, to the outside away from the stuffy shop, to Jack who needed to be warned,â€¦"

Only to be halted, yet again, by another inexplicably sturdy web by the shop entrance. She released a muffled cry before her ears picked up the unmistakable, gleeful chirrup from a certain eight-legged

love-dweller.

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After a relaxing doze on the downstairs sofa (it wasn't allowed by this, "Dad," but his little human could never say no to him), furred ears of black twitched as there was the distinct jiggle of the metal doorknob of the front door. The feline stretched, back arched and maw opened wide to release a silent yawn. That was a good rest. Toothless chose right to depart from his human's bedroom last night. His human must have been having some strange dreams because there was no way the Norwegian Forest could relax for even a few minutes before being disrupted by some strange noises coming from his friend.

Not to mention the ones from the Cold One.

The door swung open and the familiar scent of his boy flooded the house. Not long after, his voice followed. "Toothless! We're back!" Jumping off the couch, the feline trotted to the feet of his lanky best friend. Cats couldn't smile but he hoped his eyes could at least convey to the teen his delight. It worked apparently as his boy reached down and petted the spot that made him close his eyes in contentment. "Hey, budâ€¦had a nice nap?"

"Mreow." A happy flick to the tail accompanied his response.

It all went away when the Cold One appeared behind him. Toothless was close to baring his fangs at the Ice-Child, but there was something strange in the way he was staring at him. Usually, his gaze would be all over his human, but he appeared more cautious towards the suspicious feline.

His boy turned to the Cold One and said, "I'll get this stuff put away; thanks Jack." His thoughts seemed to linger on something, and if Toothless was correct (which he was often when it concerned Hiccup), it had something to do with a certain bag those green orbs were eyeing. "You can stay here and play with Toothless if you want."

The Cold One grinned, though even Toothless knew that it was strained. "No problem!" When he looked to the Norwegian Forest, it became even more apparent. "And, uhâ€¦sure I guess." Well that was newâ€¦the Ice-Child was becoming more cautious in his presence?

Excellent.

His human departed and it was as though the sun left with him. Toothless watched the Frost Spirit, knowing his eyes were trailing behind the teen in the kitchen. Then suddenly, those eyes were on him.

Jack bent down to the creature's eye-level and tilted his head to the side as an unamused look danced across toxic green irises. "Still glaring at me, huh?"

Toothless crouched low, eyes fixed on the Cold One. Jack recognized it as a preparation for attack; the feline knew it as a defensive stance. There was a pregnant pause as this time; the Cold One seemed to be behaving differently. Toothless wondered if it had something to

do with his boy.

A sigh escaped colorless lips and Toothless watched the puffs of cold air leave them. "I know. You're protective of him, aren't you?"

The Norwegian Forests's tail flicked and ears twitched. Silly creatures, humans were. But it seemed that his human and the Cold One understood that he comprehended their speech.

(Wellâ€|not entirelyâ€|but a lot can be picked up from a scarce word here and there as well as body language.)

"Winter hurt him before, huh?" Jack started softly.

The feline's eyes narrowed, but his stance slowly relaxed; there was something tinged with sadness within the Ice-Child's tone.

The Guardian watched as orbs of distrust melted away to curiosity. And a hint of suspicion. But Jack guessed it was at least progress. "Wellâ€|you shouldn't worry. I'd neverâ€|at leastâ€|I would never mean to hurt him." Jack wouldn't lie; winter was volatileâ€|lovely and deadly at the same time. A snow day could very well end up as a blizzard, the sounds of laughter twisting into shrieks of terror. Love would become loneliness in the coldest seasonâ€|but Jack would never, _ever_â€|

"Jack?"

The Guardian blinked dumbly and the tension vacated the room, expelled by the teen's stare. "Oh, hey Hiccup."

Toothless relaxed altogether and turned to his human, carefully concealing his earlier ire towards the Cold One.

There was a grin on his boy's face and Toothless would not be the reason for its disappearance. "Huhâ€|not hissing at you anymore? That's excellent progress. He might actually start liking you." The feline trotted to the brunet, tail wrapping around the skinny leg; the sound of the teen's laughter often brought the cat at ease.

Seeing the cat's blatant display of affection drew a tender gaze from the Ice Spirit. "Well, you know us! We'll learn eventually."

Hiccup snickered and plucked Toothless from the ground, cradling him for a moment. "The trick is to gain his trust first," the teen informed.

"Really, now." There might've been a smidge of skepticism in Jack's voice, but he watched the pair for a moment and saw there may be something to that with how close they were.

"It's true!" Hiccup defended. "At least, that's how we became friends."

The Winter Spirit hummed for a bit, watching the two's interaction closely. "And how exactly do you 'gain' a cat's 'trust'?"

Hiccup placed the feline back on the floor, watching him lick the mussed fur back into place. Thinking back to his misadventures of

meeting with the Norwegian Forest and eventually earning their friendship, this was what the teen had to offer: "I guess it's the same with peopleâ€¦you spend time with them, learn their likes and dislikes, a present here or there to let them know that you mean no harm, and show that you're willing to trust them in return."

Naturally curious, Jack asked, "And how did you go about doing all that?"

There was a short burst of laughter from Hiccup, mind lost in the memory. "Lots of trial and error." And he meant a lot. But there was an enchanting moment that stood above the othersâ€¦it was certainly a little silly when he thought back to it, but at that time, it was pure wonder. Hiccup's gaze softened. "Here, hold out your hand like thisâ€¦now, don't look straight at himâ€¦he's prideful so let him come to you instead of cornering him." He was sure that both of them were giving him strange looks, but paid no mind to it.

There was definitely some slight hesitancy in the feline's actions but after some silent prodding from Hiccup, Toothless cautiously leaned his head against Jack's palm.

Hiccup beamed in triumph. "There ya go."

The Guardian blinked. "Huhâ€¦that's all it took?" He ran a hand over the cat's furry head, surprised at how soft the strands felt against his fingers. Hiccup obviously took very good care of him for his fur to be that healthy.

"Well, it might help that I'm here," the brunet confessed. "But if you need any more help, scratch him on his chin, to his left." The cat's eyes widened in betrayal before they promptly fell shut as the Cold One managed to locate (one of) his weakness(es). He fell to the floor in a puddle of contentment.

"Woah!" Jack grinned. "That is wicked cool." He sniggered when the cat mewled in delight as he grazed the area once more.

"It's his favorite spot. He just melts when you do it right." Hiccup leaned against the wall, watching the two. There was something oddly cute about them getting alongâ€¦

"Hehâ€¦guess you're Boneless now," Jack teased as Toothless lay on his back, unmoving as long as his fingers kept scratching.

Hiccup shook his head. "Bad pun, Jack." Still, a ghost of a smile lingered on his lips as Toothless attempted to regain control of himself. Little paws waved in the air, claws clamping down on a shadowy wrist. "He also likes chasing things and doesn't really mind playing rough."

"Ackâ€¦! yeahâ€¦ I can kinda tellâ€¦" Jack winced as little fangs gnawed on his hand, Toothless apparently at ease with the situation. The Ice Spirit raised a brow and flinched as 'Toothless' certainly did not live up to his name, if the sharp spikes in the feline's mouth had anything to say about it. "You sure he's starting to like me?"

The teen rolled his eyes. "It's just a play-bite Jackâ€|believe me, when he's really mad at you, you'll know."

"That's comforting," the Frost Spirit mumbled. He moved his hand away, only to have the creature attach himself to his skin, teeth embedding into his flesh without puncturing the skin. "Okay, ow. How do I make him stop?" He frowned. He was sure the little demon was enjoying this.

"Toothless, release," Hiccup lazily commanded.

Miraculously, the demon abided, giving the area a small lick. An apology of sorts or maybe the little beast decided it liked the taste of his flesh, Jack didn't know.

"You taught him tricks too?" Not that Jack was surprised in the least.

"Cats are intelligent," Hiccup countered.

The Winter Guardian laughed. "Yeah but they're usually incredibly stubborn."

"So we all have something in common, then," Hiccup replied with a light smile.

As if jaded by whatever the human(oids) were discussing, the feline made his silent exit; perhaps one of his toys was still in the den, one that "Dad" didn't trip over or crush with his immense size. A nice distraction from the ruckus his boy and the Cold One usually made was what he needed. With nothing more than a swish of his tail, he was out of sight.

"Well, there he goes," Jack commented.

Hiccup nodded, accustomed to his friend's habits. "Yeah, he does that. He'll be back when he feels like it, which is probably around dinner." _'Speaking of dinnerâ€|'_

The teen headed back to the kitchen; a few bags still needed to be packed away, and others were scattered across the counter, deflated like sad balloons that needed to be either thrown or stowed away. Weariness was starting to creep in, but he'd never hear the end of it if his dad saw something halfway done. Hiccup eyed the mess, flummoxed as to how he managed to even bring everything here in once piece.

"So, you almost done?" Well, that answered Hiccup's questionâ€|

"Yup, just about," the teen replied. He peeked into a bag and separated what needed to be placed in the pantry and what needed to be refrigerated immediately. He really couldn't blame the bagger for the strange placements. Past the turkey incidentâ€"

Hiccup shook his head. Right, back to work it is then.

After putting away a bit of produce, a wandering shadow caught his eye, appearing to gaze nonchalantly at the pile of bags still waiting to be packed away. Was it strange that Hiccup could almost _see_ the

veil of disinterest on the Guardian's face? Agitation spiked as Hiccup started towards the remaining pile, exhaling the day's stress into the suffocating distance between them. The teen resisted commenting on the strangely quiet atmosphere until he could practically feel eyes (were they really ice blue, or was that really justâ€|?) glancing over his shoulder.

"Why are you hovering?" The teen smirked a bit as he felt the air freeze; with it, so did Jack.

The Guardian quickly assembled a grin and a tone to go along with it. "Oh, just wondering what you were hiding earlier. You know, in one of those bags?"

Hiccup didn't even bother hiding his tired glare. "You really don't know when to let things go, do you?" He did the same with his blush.

"Nope!" Jack happily replied. "Now any particular reason why you wanted to hide that particular bag?"

"Will you just hold on and let me finish with these?" the teen bargained (wellâ€|pleaded).

"Nope!" And Hiccup could also almost see an infuriating grin on that ghostly figure.

"Seriously?" the teen groaned.

"I'm a man on a mission, Hiccup." As if to prove a point, the Ice Spirit rummaged through the plastics in search of something incriminating. Hiccup had to pinch the bridge of his nose and count to three just to ward off the incoming migraine. "I'll turn this kitchen upside-down if I have to."

Now that thought was terrifying. He'd seen what Jack could do to a turkey and a slab of pork. "Why do I have a feeling that you're serious?" The teen sighed as the Guardian chuckled. "All right! Just don't destroy the place." The brunet reached into a bag cluttered with his school supplies and after a few seconds of scouring beneath pens, pencils, and notebooks, Jack blinked and missed it when something small, soft, and furry smacked him in the face.

Apparently, Hiccup had quite the throwing arm too.

It was laying in Jack's hands now, its button eyes gazing at him, stitched mouth formed in a blank expression, yet appearing delighted all the same. It was the color of ivory and was plush in his hands as Jack ran a hand over its round ears to its snout. "Is thisâ€|" It took a moment for his brain to comprehend what he was holding, but this morning's conversation suddenly flooded his memory and the Ice Spirit was soon smiling widely, to the point where he was pretty sure he was shaking with silent laughter.

It was quite a wonder why Hiccup's face wasn't permanently stained red. "Something for you to uh, hang on toâ€|o-or squeeze to death when Iâ€|" Hiccup could babble on all he wanted. Still didn't make up for the fact that he bought Jack Frost a teddy bear. "Okay, so I obviously didn't think through the decision to buying that earlier so

would you please not say anything?" The poor brunet was utterly imploring now, but winter had always been merciless.

"Nope!" Jack decided that he was glad Hiccup couldn't see the stupidly happy grin on his face right then; the teen was just too adorable.

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Day faded quickly until the sky tinged with the hues of night, soon swallowing the earth whole in its sanctuary from the waking hours. Tides and seasons, life and death, all cycles in spheres, orbs, the sun and moon, the windows to souls. Eyes absorb the world; vision was just a technicality for those easily led astray by empowered egos. After all, what was seeing without believing? Blind men catch the grains of truth that lapse from the sieves cynics hold to balance what is true and what is false. But it is wisdom that truly guides the hands of what is and what is not. Fate merely instigates the game and love falls betwixt and between.

It was sullen for a moment in Hiccup's bedroom. As it became a habit, Jack opted to sleep there that night as well. "So, school tomorrow huh?" he started uneasily.

"Yeahâ€¦the middle of the sophomore termâ€¦" was the hushed reply. Beside him, the sounds of Hiccup shifting about provided a short burst of sound that was soon eaten away by the dark.

"You feeling okay about it?" He wanted to take the teen's hand, but maybe that should be saved for another night; the teen seemed jittery around dinner. Had the Winter Spirit taken his hand, it probably would have been more perplexing than comforting.

"I guess so," he murmured. "I mean, there's no stopping the next day so there's really no use worrying." _'Anymore,'_ his treacherous brain quipped.

"That's a very mature perspective," Jack remarked with just the tiniest drops of sarcasm sprinkled onto his words; he was there when Hiccup's dad started interrogating him about what he knew of the school and his subjects. The man had even switched to using English just to get Hiccup used to it. Jack shook his head. Had that discussion between them been for a grade, Jack would have given Hiccup a C for effort.

Hiccup scoffed. "Says the guy holding a teddy bear." Sass was something that would never fly under the brunet's radar.

"Says the guy who bought me said teddy bear," Jack cheerfully rebutted.

Hiccup turned to his side away from Jack, face red. "It was more for a joke than anything."

"Funny, if I recall, I was the only one laughing." And just because he could, Jack followed suit and wrapped his arms around the teen, delighting in the little dance within the brunet's chest. The bear, sandwiched between them, didn't seem to mind one bit.

The teen's face felt flush, but that was fine as long as Jack

couldn't see it. "It's so you won't strangle me tomorrow morning; I gotta wake up early, you know," he huffed. But at this point, it seemed pretty moot as Jack seemed keen on keeping Hiccup right within arm's reach.

There was a light rumble in his chest when Jack laughed and it tingled pleasantly against Hiccup's back. "Yeah, yeah, don't worry; you'll get your beauty sleep." And suddenly it was gone. "Do you want me to leave? I can if you want, you know." There was something tense in his voice and even though Hiccup knew he could, he also knew that it wasn't something Jack wanted. It was something that he didn't want either.

So Hiccup replied a little too quickly. "Nah, I'm okay with you hereâ€¦" His back got a little colder and after getting used to it for the past few days, the brunet knew that Jack scooted a bit closer to his side. "It'sâ€¦nice having you around to talk to," Hiccup confessed. And right now, that was the only truth he could cling to.

Jack chuckled but it wasn't without relief underlying the faint sound. "You're welcome~" And night seemed to settle into the house afterwards, luring with its voiceless call to the realm of dreams. That was, until a flicker of luminosity refused to be smothered by drowsy eyes and tired voices. "So, are you going to finish that sentence?"

Already laden with sleep, the brunet's reply was accompanied by a wide yawn. "What?"

"From earlier!" The Guardian knew he sounded overenthusiastic, but he knew the niggling little thought would keep him awake and it was better to ask now than to awaken Hiccup in the middle of the night, leaving the teen lethargic in the morning. At least, that was the excuse his mind came up with on the spot. "C'mon you said you thought of avalanches with JÃ¶kul, what do you think about with me?" And Jack really did try not to let his hopes ride on this one answer, but it did mean a lot to him so there might've been a silent prayer he breathed when the last word exited his mouth, and why hadn't Hiccup said anything?

Was he asleep?

After perhaps a moment more, Hiccup turned over to him and with a somber expression, and the words "â€¦Polar bears," left his lips.

"What?" The Frost Guardian was undoubtedly taken aback.

And then the teen's face contorted to something like pain and confusion (or more likely, the face of a disrupted bear poked with a stick during hibernation). "I don't know anymoreâ€¦" he whined. "I really don'tâ€¦that's kind of why I didn't finish my sentence earlierâ€¦" he trailed off.

"Oh..." It wasn't too easy to cover up the disappointment; in fact, Jack didn't even try.

The atmosphere was heavy for a few moments, like thunder awaiting rain. Then Hiccup reached over to the bear between them, stroking the

factory-sewn fur and it took a while for Jack to realize it, but as the teen's hands lingered on the toy's left paw and his own hand resided on the rightâ€

They were holding hands again.

(Indirectly, but Jack took what he could.)

Hiccup gave a light squeeze to the plush of fabric and stuffing. "â€|there's plenty of time to think about that later thoughâ€|"

Jack returned the gesture. "Yeah."

"I'll probably get even more of an idea when I can properly see youâ€|" the teen continued with a smile and even in the darkness, Jack could picture it clearly.

"Yeah, you're right." And he felt better; he really did. "You better not forget about me when your winter break's over!" the Guardian warned.

'_Where did that come from?_' the teen idly wondered. "Of course not. I doubt that'll ever happen, even when I shrivel up with age," he scoffed.

Jack gave him a smile; although broken, it was all he had to offer. "Iâ€|hope so." And somehow, all those doubts were back and the first pangs of regret reverberated through the Guardian of Winter's mind. Because when it came down to it they were really just a Winter Spirit and a teenagerâ€|an entire universe away with nothing but an illusion of a reality to share.

"Andâ€|you'll still be hereâ€|right?" The uncertainty in his voice brought Jack to the presentâ€|to now, not years and lifetimes down the roadâ€|with Hiccup lying beside him, holding him there as though he was afraid the Guardian would dissolve to evanescence within a blink of an eye, a single breath.

This time, he reached over and placed a cool hand atop Hiccup's, reveling in the other's warmth. "Hm?"

Jack held back a laugh; under the shade of night, that blush of the teen's managed to outshine even Dreamsand across winter night. "Well, not likeâ€|right here in my bedroomâ€|in my bedâ€|but you knowâ€|a-around." And it was then that he realized Hiccup shared the same fears. "Even after I start school and the seasons begin to changeâ€|you can still visit, right?" It took every bit of sense that Jack possessed not to crush the teen into his arms and kiss the living daylights out of him because even though that scared and hopeful look in his eyes screamed at him to do something to soothe his fears, Jack was willing to bet that Hiccup would make good use of his threat to start locking his doors and windows from now on if he followed through with it.

So instead he grinned and squeezed the teen's fingers reassuringly. "You bet! I'm not leaving your side until you can fully see me!"

And the teen was smiling again, but there was something in his eyes that reflected a fleck of worry, a droplet of fear. "And what happens after that?"

"Thenâ€¦ we'll find something else to do together." It was a fragile promise, backed with nothing but words; it was an oath to the heart, fortified by the love thrumming through his veins.

"All rightâ€¦" And Hiccup was. "Sounds like a plan."

"You knowâ€¦ even when you grow up, I'll still be here no matter what. I'll still be a Guardian as long as kids need meâ€¦" "Even when you won't" "So you're right: there's really no getting rid of me." It was a bitter truth, but as long as there existed one of them, it would be there. The bliss of their union and the agony of their separationâ€¦ love left no room for doubt.

The teen gave him one final tired smile, but it was the happiest one he'd ever seen. "I'm good with thatâ€¦"

"You'll always believe in me, won't you?" Now, it was Hiccup's turn to promise.

"Mhmâ€¦" was the sluggish reply. Although not as eloquent as Jack would have liked, the Guardian decided it would do.

Running his thumb over the teen's knuckles, Jack felt the anxiety there melt away. "You better get to sleep. It's the big day tomorrow." The weak grip around his hand tightened before relaxing; a gesture of thanks, a shy reciprocation.

"M'kayâ€¦ g'nightâ€¦" and after that, the teen's voice died away.

"Goodnightâ€¦" Jack whispered. But Hiccup was already asleep.

Sleep was a siren amid a storm of troubles and worries, her song alluring and pledges wicked. She thieved time and drugged with toxins more potent than belladonnas. Yet before the mind of a certain Frost Spirit fell victim to her charmsâ€¦ there was that one stray thought that anchored him to safety: a deceptively innocent flower of vivid lavenders and supernatural vibrancy. It stood, austere and proud against his seasonal rule, stubborn and out of place with a covert purpose.

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It was more difficult this time; Phil signaled for the others to make a break through the main hallway and up the flight of stairs. As sturdy as they come, stealth wasn't always a focal point in their duty. But it was expected of North's yetis to follow through with a mission.

Infiltration was easy enough; after years in the workshop, tinkering with gears and gadgets, disarming an alarm here and there and weaving past cluttered obstacles became second nature. It wasâ€¦ the quiet part that they had trouble with.

Phil sighed as yet another recruit stubbed his toe noisily againstâ€¦ what was that, a table? After a violent >"Shh!" from a comrade, they resumed position. As the head of his department, Phil wondered why they couldn't have just called. It would have been so much easier. He shook his head; now wasn't the

time to think about aborting the plan or even changing the gameplay. They had already come so close and the boss had had them assembled right after the Tooth Fairy and the Easter Bunny reported their failure.<p>

It was the yetis' time to shine.

The bedroom was slightly ajar, enticing them for a sudden entry, a frontal assault. But Phil knew better.

His comrade, however, did not.

Phil slapped a palm over his face as a young and eager recruit burst through the doors with the others following suit like a herd of sheep. Did they forget it was he who was holding the _sack?!_

After breaking through the crowd (via ramming through the squirming throng to get through to the other side of the slim doorway), Phil was automatically halted by none other than their mission's objective.

There was a weak grin in the darkness, night consuming most of it. "Yeahâ€|I pretty much expected this. There's no need for _that_." A finger was jabbed in the direction of the sack. There was a sigh from their intended captive as the silhouette moved across the bedroom, gazing impassively at an open window. "I'll go if you all be quiet; I don't want anyone waking."

* * *

><p>Good job Jack; you finally made it to the "holding hands" stage. Hiccup blushed a lot in this chapter, huh? (Well, he can clearly hear Jack's voice nowâ€|)

*= The chapter's titled "Carpathia," after the ship that saved the Titanic survivors. (Haha, get it? She saves sinking shipsâ€|okay, bad joke, I'm sorry.) Cupid's very bitter concerning her job because when the glamour of love turned to centuries of disasters and cynicism, she grew tired and scared of handling her duty altogether. But, as Bunnymund alludes, she was much happier (and sane) in earlier times (Romantic Period and Renaissance, where human emotion was valued and love was exalted in art and poetry) and her songs were much moreâ€|pleasant.

*= As for her "partnership" with Asterâ€|Easter is believed by some to have originated as a holiday feast for the goddess Ä'ostre (thus, the name), the spring and fertility deity that represents dawn, before Christianity became a major religion in Europe. Valentines was a day commemorating "romance," dealing with emotional love, while the celebration of "Easter" was one of "physical" love. And thus, Cupid's innuendo. So uhmâ€|hahaâ€|I guess I now know why there are eggs about that time of year (though, this is mostly speculationâ€|interesting speculation, however). And I know that Bunnymund has his own back-story and while I'd like to pay homage to it, this is _fanfiction_, so I hope people out there will forgive me for it. And I apologize profusely if this information is horribly skewed.

(And yes, Cupid has her own hotline.)

*= In floriography (the language of flowers), lavenders contain a

double-entendre of devotion and distrust.

*=Porphyria is in reference to Robert Browning's poem, "Porphyria's Lover," depicting a man strangling his lover so she would remain with him (You all should really look at itâ€"though disturbing, it's one of my favorite poems).

*= about Greenland's nameâ€"I'm not very sure. Some sources say it's a myth, some say it's accurate, so I guess I'll chalk that one up to popular belief.

Yes, it's back! "Baby it's Cold Outside" is officially my (head)canon song for this story (and this couple). Oh and if anyone's confused:

The guy's parts of the song.

The lady's parts of the song.

Jack and Hiccup singing.

-promptly dies- this isâ€"the longest chapter I've ever written.

(â€"Okay, I'm sorry but I tried?)

14. Secrets and Sonatas

Another chapter up! I hope everyone's having a great vacation. Again, I want to thank everyone who reads this story. You are all wonderful people and I hope that this doesn't disappoint any one of you.

This goes especially for ****Just Call Me Endy****. Words cannot express how thankful I am for your help and your patienceâ€"and I believe I am getting more and more redundant with each chapter by saying thatâ€"

Oh lord, fanart of Cupid? My oh my wow...thank you so much ****shakinelves ****for the beautiful piece and ****soulrhapsody**** for the WIP!

****Disclaimer:**** I own nothing but a laptop and certain plot elements.

* * *

><p>"Besides, it wasn't just love that held people together. There were secrets, and the price you paid to keep them." - Stephen King

* * *

><p>Man's greatest treasure and heaviest burdens are composed of secretsâ€"delicate and fragile little whispers of the mind, malicious and wicked thoughts guiding unsure hands and collapsing the corrupting conscience. They uphold the spires of gloryâ€"the summit of creation. They carve the chasms of damnationâ€"the zenith of ruin. They take power from actions not taken and actions unseen, of what is said and what is locked behind capricious lips. Whether to be shared

under fervid breaths and low voices or to be left to decay as the mind's prisoner, each precious little word provides a key or a catalyst. For benefit or calamity, every low murmur, shifting gaze, withheld breath, and unspoken fear supplies one more answer and two more questions to existence's boundless mysteries. Truth operates on perspective, wielding catastrophic variations from the outspoken and the implication. But it was easier to keep quiet, to let others scurry about like little ants under siege from a cruel young boy's game. Secrets, Cupid believed, gave one power. And power was something she could all but cling to.<p>

Half-lidded carmine eyes expressed little emotion, bordering tedium at best as swirls of color exploded against the still night air, shattering the dark through gyres of light. With a yeti guarding her at each side, her lips remained closed, even as she stepped through the portal North's henchmen were kind enough to supply for their target. There was a brief gust of winter breezes and magic, then warmth. She blinked the daze of vivid vortexes from her sight, taking in the holiday colors of red and green of the Pole's décor as the yetis scattered, their mission accomplished.

"Ah, Cupid! So good of you to join us." She didn't even flinch as the thick Russian accent reverberated through the parlor.

A sardonic smile graced her lips, eyes gleaming with deviance. "Greetings, Nicholas! I wish I could share the same sentiments." Cupid tipped her head in a mock bow, concealing her mirth as she elicited an audible huff.

North regarded the woman carefully. She still held her intimidating air as well as her arrogance. Still, neither truly bothered the Guardian of Wonder; seldom did Cupid flaunt her presence. "Would you like anything?" the man offered. On cue, Dingle scurried through the doors, spilling droplets and streams of sweet liquid from the frothing mugs on the tray balanced atop his head. "Milk, hot chocolate!"

"I appreciate your consideration, but it wouldn't be very wise to accept refreshments from your captor, would it?" There was a deceptively pleasant air about her that dropped to a more truthful grimace as she looked to the elf. Dingle blinked back and a mug nearly tipped over as he fled behind North, quivering in fear. "Plus, I'm well aware of these little creatures' disciplining problems," she drawled.

The man in red scoffed. "Oh? And the vermin you keep meet your standard?" Really? The woman shouldn't be speaking spiders for heaven's sake!

Unfazed, she nodded. "Indeed they do; they at least get the job done, which is more than I can say for the company you keep." And that same, irritating smile was back on her face.

A flicker of irritation was ignited and was only further fed as North detected amusement from the Winged Deity of Love. "They try their best. Honesty in work is what matters" which is more than I can say for the company you keep," he replied, vehemence slipping into his words. No one mocked his elves no one but Nicholas Saint North! after all, he paid them.

"You seem to be sending me some mixed signals here," she sighed, a parody of hurt playing at her lips. "Then againâ€¦the yetis?" She raised a brow.

"I only wanted to ensure your cooperation, Cupid," North graciously reassured with a short laugh, this time amusement playing in his favor.

Cupid replied with her own chuckle. "And what made you think I would pass up the honor of meeting the Big Four?" She walked about, feigning interest at North's jolly home. "All I ask for is a more creative coercion." The woman stopped before a tall grandfather clock, majestic and intricate in design, catching her attention; something like wistfulness threatened to cry from its locked cage before she found herself and immediately stamped down the troublesome sentiment.

North rolled his eyes. "Something told me you wouldâ€¦"

There was a slight commotion outside and before another snide remark left Cupid's lips of incompetent elves, Bunnymund burst through the doors. "North! Is the sheâ€¦" He froze, something more potent than unease and much more unpleasant than shock paralyzing his system; their eyes met for just a second and Cupid could already feel the animosity stirring in the air. When he spoke again, it was made even clearer through his words: "Well, well, wellâ€¦speak o' the she-devilâ€¦" Aster relaxed his posture, but she wasn't fooled; he was edgy, something that has never changed.

"A pleasure to see you, too." She toyed with the thought of extending her hand in greeting, but more than likely, there were still too many things that the Easter Bunny could not forgive her for, so even a farce of a polite greeting would be an act of treachery to the rabbit's eyes. Still, she smiled. "How have you been, Bunnymund?" Still, that didn't mean that she couldn't irritate him with words.

"Great," he replied drily. To North, he dictated, "Don't let 'er outta your sight."

Cupid stifled a snicker. "Oh, don't be so cold, Aster." Her mirth only grew as he growled. "All I ask is your wellbeing. Then again, you don't really have much to worry about, do you?"

He raised a paw, prepared to interject. "Listen hereâ€¦"

But unfortunately, he was dealing with a scornful woman with the unfortunate habit of speaking too much. "A cozy little job painting eggs for children to find, a one day work-yearâ€¦"

Bunny fumed; how dare she! "Now hang on thereâ€¦"

"Yes, yes, you certainly are moving up in the worldâ€¦not much difficulty in that department. Giving children hope and tooth decay from all the sweets and garbage they gorge onâ€¦" she paused to get a good look at her ex-partner, something sadistic within her singing with glee. Oh yes, those eyes were definitely narrowed with loathing and the poor creature was positively glowering in her presence. Perfect.

A chuckle rumbled through North as he listened to the bickering pair; really, they were both still just children in their own way. "Hah, your holiday is not much better." But he could still take sides, at least.

Cupid gave a pointed look to the man's belly. "And neither is yours, Nick."

And whatever conflict a statement like that said with audacity to Santa Clause himself would have inexorably erupted was rudely (and thankfully) dispersed as Toothiana barged through the doors in one frantic motion. "North! Iâ€"oh!" Violet eyes widened and a nervous, "Cupidâ€" flew from her mouth.

"And here comes the lady responsible for cleaning up the aftermath." The Deity gave an exaggerated curtsy to the winged lady and that courteous veneer was applied carefully back in place. "It's good to see you again, Toothianaâ€" She saw how the woman seemed torn between anxiety and offense, so she aided her with that decision: "How are you and your little fairy brigade?" The Personification of Love didn't even attempt to bite back her grin as the Tooth Fairy's feathers began to ruffle.

"You know darn well how my fairies are!" she accused, flying up to Cupid in a threatening manner; at least, it would have been deemed threatening if Cupid didn't even blink and only kept that same haughty smile plastered on her lips.

"Do all of you take offense to a simple question?" she digressed with a disapproving tone. As if to answer to the rhetorical question, the Sandman walked through the door and thusly disrupted the raucous atmosphere. Cupid very nearly took a breath of relief. "Oh, Sandyâ€"a delight to see you, as always," she greeted and it was perhaps the most honest thing she said all night.

The petite man nodded, glittering grains whirling atop his head; he then tipped his golden hat to her.

She smiled pleasantly. "And how do you fare?"

Sandy shrugged, gesturing a "so-so" in reply.

Although equally baffled as everyone else by the civility between the two, Toothiana was not about to let the other woman get away with what she did. Boldly grasping her shoulders, an enraged Tooth Fairy demanded, "Cupid! Why did you order your spiders to attack my fairies?!"

"My dear, it was hardly an attack," she drawled, forcing the woman's hands off from her. 'An ambush perhaps,' the Deity mused.

Bunny took a step forward; Toothiana wasn't the only one who had a bone to pick with the she-devil and presently, more vital problems needed to be addressed. He looked her in the eyes, fierce blues clashing with clandestine reds. "Ya said it wasn't your business, so why did ya butt in?" Something more than irritation spiked when nothing but a taunting smile was given in reply; this wasn't like Cupid at allâ€"something was wrong, something had pushed the woman out of her precarious equilibrium and that made her all the more

dangerous.

"Do you know how long it took to peel the webs off of their feathers?! It'll take months before Division One can grow them all back!" the Guardian of Memories continued heatedly.

"Hell's bellsâ€|" Cupid sighed. Apparently the Big Four were never big on interrogations; shouldn't they at least take turns?

"What happened to not takin' part of this, hm?" Toothiana backed away as Bunnymund advanced towards the Deity of Love. "Haven't ya learned anythin'?" A part of Cupid wanted to laugh at the situationâ€"Bunnymund was _chastising_ her, fur bristling and teeth bared. "What happened to _not messin' with love_?" Although hissing, he was speaking quite loudly now; it was quite amusingâ€|as acrid as the situation was.

Cupid congratulated herself while remaining stoic, eyes calculating and cold. "I believe that's _your_ philosophy. And I believe that I did what I could to stop _you_ from intervening," she rebutted as she stabbed her index finger to Bunny's chest. She didn't miss how he winced under the contact; yes, as insignificant as it was, she still held some control over the Guardian of Hope.

The air was alive with tension, Dreamsand, and fluttering feathers as tantrums and words flew like bullets in warfare, fervid and frustrating all at once as noise trembled like quakes in rising magnitudes foreseeing natural disastersâ€"all came to a deathly silence as the Guardian of Wonder spoke, crashing through the noisy quarrels and instilling despairing turmoil. These grave words were directed at the Personification of Love:

"Do you not know what will happen to Jack when this boy can no longer see him?"

And suddenly a harsh solemnity settled like plagues, silent, infectious, and decimating to the life of the parlor's inhabitants. Cupid blinked up at the man in red, something flaring in her eyes like dying stars leaving gaping voids in the fading supernova's wake. Still, she said nothing.

Bunny was the first to break from the unsettling spell, eyes downcast as he shifted away from her. "It's somethin' that all kids doâ€|" he confessed.

Toothiana sighed, vibrant irises dimming as she hovered just above the ground. "When children grow up, they lose the ability to see magicâ€|They stop believing, in time."

"All of them," Bunny affirmed. There was something beneath the finality of the declaration, slivers of bitterness and remorse weaving into his words, settling just beneath the surface.

And just as Cupid caught that, she did not miss the way North's jaw clenched, a tactful show of restraint that curiously breached through her calm, as though he wanted to interject, to argueâ€"but as to what, Cupid did not know. Instead, the man faced her and began to explain. "We did not tell Jack because we did not want to upset him; meeting Jamie and friends gave him chance of happiness and hope he needs after centuries of loneliness." Grey eyes softened and there

came a gentle chuckle tainted with melancholy, memory marred by the inevitable, the helplessly fated. "You should have seen look on his faceâ€|we had never seen him more happyâ€|"

Sandy nodded, having been there just in time to witness Jack working together with them, finding a place by their side. While Sandy had been swallowed by the darkness, upon his return, there was a definite difference from the Jack he knew before and the Jack that stood by him then. And it was true; that had been the day Jack was given purpose; after three hundred years of his existence, of aimless solitude and desperation, there was suddenly meaning. There came a chance of life and not mere subsistence, the downpour after endless droughts, what should have been his happy ending after his long journey. But it never stops there; life continues on, and for a Guardian, that could well mean an eternity. Time alters its grand and omnipotent form to that of a cruel mistress, always faithful, a wretched companion. And so much is sacrificed for her fidelity.

And many times, Bunny questioned if the Guardian of Fun was strong enough to face her demands. "He acts strong, but really, he's still just a child on the inside," he murmured.

Toothiana looked to him, understanding in her eyes, and nodded. "The lonelinessâ€|still gets him, you know?" She sought that same understanding from Cupid. "After a year of being a Guardian, he still hasn't found many believers. And sometimes, it takes its tollâ€|" A shiver raced through her body from a remembrance; whose it was, Cupid did not know as well.

"Blizzards, avalanches, hailstorms, ya name itâ€|" Bunny listed, counting off a digit for each item. He couldn't suppress the sigh that followed. "The kid's still emotionally unstableâ€|and vulnerable."

"He has learned better control after centuries. He is Guardian of Fun, after allâ€|" North attempted a grin, perhaps trying to recover a lighter mood, perhaps trying to chase after an elusive optimism. "Always after laughs, always wanting smilesâ€|" But his smile proved to be only painted, inanimate and cheaply imitated.

"Always bein' a bloody show-ponyâ€|" the Easter Bunny grumbled, but at least he appreciated North's efforts.

"But falling in love?" And then the shoddy replica was dismissed by the Guardian of Memories. This was the underlying emotionâ€|"the desperation and protectiveness, the worry and anxiety, the fear and sorrow. "Cupid, you have to understandâ€|" She searched for sympathy but all that the Guardian saw were glassy red orbs, empty like mirrors. Nevertheless, Toothiana tried again to reach the callous woman; there absolutely had to be a way to get her to listen. "What you do, it's amazingâ€|love holds this world together. It's beautiful and wonderful andâ€|"

"Has the power to destroy 'im." There was no more than a returned stare from Cupid at Bunnymund's outburst.

"Cupid, can you not see what losing this boy will do to him?" North took a deep breath, as if trying to collect the warmth of the air around him. There might've been something like pain in his eyes, an evident worry that had deeply ingrained itself in his tired bones.

"If he has fallen in love with this teenager and when that teenager can no longer see him, can no longer remember him, all traces of magic gone from his short lifeâ€" The crescendo came to an abrupt halt like smothered fire, leaving only embers at his finish. "It will make him more alone than he has ever beenâ€" | "

"We planned on tellin' Frostâ€" when he got a bit more used to the job. When he had more believers to hold on to. He knows he doesn't have long with this boy, but what if it's just months away? Weeks, days?" He turned to his old partner, hoping for just a glimmer of sympathy; that would be enough to build a beacon for resolution to guide through. But he saw nothing and just like centuries ago when the first inklings of pessimism began to steal away her smiles and songs, when she first became like this, he felt that desperation bleed through; because it wasn't just her that he had to worry about now. "Hours?" he croaked and he nearly cursed as not even a speck of emotion could be evoked from the Personification of Love. But he continued anyways; there was no other choice than to try. "If he's head over heels for this boy righ' nowâ€" and that time suddenly comes when that teenager sees righ' through him, can never hold his hand again, or hear another word he'll sayâ€" | " He hoped and hoped and very nearly prayed for her sympathy, for her pity, for even just her consideration and maybe that would be enoughâ€" | because if notâ€" | "He'll never be truly happy at another child believin' in him...not with knowin' it'll all go away with time."

There was a pleading look from Sandy; from the corner of Cupid's eye, she could see the man truly silent. The golden grains remained suspended in air; this was not the time for dreams. This was of harsh realities and the consequences of time's infinity. And though he never said a word, it was all Sandy could do for the Deity's compliance.

"We are not blind to his despair, Cupid." North stood by his friends, fortifying their bond as not only allies, but as a makeshift family. A family willing to do anything to protect their youngest. "We have suffered through losing our believersâ€" our children. It is difficult, but it is possible to move on. But Jack is still youngâ€" heart and mind. He will move on, yesâ€" | but not without the painful reminder of what could not be."

And how could he with despair devouring his heart? The heart possessed many secrets, but love's brutality stood in infamy. How could the thorns of romance not tear at the bleeding organ when love was ripped from its roots and left to wilt under winter's agony? Because love tormented the mind and left more casualties than any battle, cutting deeper than any blade, and having the power to break the soul in every way. Time healed all wounds, but scars never fade. Because this time, this time it wasn't superficial, it wasn't a travesty, it wasn't the charade of what Cupid had endured through for centuriesâ€" | "

It was love. Genuine, authentic, real, and absolute, indisputable, and above allâ€" _ true_ love.

And perhaps it was because of that acceptance that there came a tense lapse of silence, the unnerved peace before imminent chaos, the bated breath of fool's paradise and the augur of wishful and wistful thinking â€" | because in reality, what could be expected out of truth and love than the cruel laughter that was sure to follow?

And Cupid did not disappoint. Mad cackles echoed in haunting rhythms, a burst of absurdity, the malicious delight in the crestfallen faces of the Guardians and the self-inflicted ache within her own chest. "And you think I _care_?"

But of course, bitter disappointment quickly escalated to fury.

"What?!" North boomed.

"Cupidâ€!" And those angry irises of violet were alight once more with rageâ€"at least the woman could finally choose, the Deity surmised.

Even Sandy was left aghast, face contorting to utter betrayal and vehemence. It was no matter to Cupid; she would have found some way to merit the petite man's wrath some time or another.

The last of a cold chuckle escaped her lips, smoke evaporating into the air. "You all act like I have some personal vendetta against youâ€"or as though I have no idea how _believing_ works." She too shared that burden and she knew full well how it could _destroy_. The beginnings of a snarl eased on her expression, breaking the aloof pretense, lunacy and perhaps her own acts of misery seeping into her admissions. "Yes, I knew from the very start. I knew how painful it would be and I knew Jack Frost had no idea what he was getting himself into."

Faintly, past the outrage and peaking contempt, disbelief and pain shone through Aster's eyes. "Youâ€!"

"But there's no stopping it!" The crazed laughter continued, tumbling from her mouth, as effortlessly as losing one's mind after millenniums of catastrophe. And then her face darkened, all traces of a smile gone, eclipsed by anguish and revulsion. "There never is," she spat. But she took the pieces of her broken mask and carefully reapplied them, expression grotesquely torn between malevolence and desolation. "Therefore I am _so_ deeply sorry and I apologize that I can't help you, but I appreciate your wasted efforts." Her grin could barely stay put, almost slipping away from her face and collapsing into pitiful, injuring, and suffering cries. Yet somehow, she managed at least one more taunt despite it all: "I'm sure _Jack_ will."

"Now you stop righ' there!" It wasn't the fire in his eyes that stopped her; it was the ire in his words that made the capricious woman nearly flinch. Breathing harsh and unable to endure her presence any longer, Bunnymund divulged in this "truth" that she _so_ adored. "You do nothin' but hide away behind webs and words, thinkin' that all your problems will go away if you just ignore it! You can do what's righ' and fix all this, but you won't!" He didn't care if he was yelling, if he was out of line, if he was frightening his friends, so long_, so long_, as she _finally, finally,_ listened to what should have been said so long ago. "All because you're _scared_â€"you're scared o' what's out there! Scared of your _job_! Scared of what you're _put_ _here_ for!" And he could see itâ€"the faintest of cracks in those mirrors of carmine, of something beyond caustic remarks and forced insanity... "You're scared of _yourself_.â€"and it was utterly pathetic. "I'm glad I left... I'd rather spend the rest of eternity paintin' eggs and makin' kids happyâ€"givin'

them hope, somethin' meaningful and worthwhileâ€|than work with you, ya miserable ol' hag." And he suddenly couldn't look at her anymore; this _thing_ wasn't half the woman he once knew.

Cupid forced a chuckle, the sound limp like wounded animal. "Are you done?"

"Not yetâ€|not by a long shot. You used to be the stuff _love_ was made of. And now your _curse_ has done nothin' but destroy the lives of others. And it'll be a cold day in hell before I let you destroy _Jack_." He turned his back and walked away; she wasn't worth it.

"Bunnyâ€|" Toothiana whispered, astonished and devastated.

"No, he's very much right." And it hurt to keep smiling like that, despite centuries of practice. Still, it had to be done; without that smile, more and more people like Bunny could see right through her too easily. "But that changes nothing and I stand by what I say." Her voice remained steady and she was pleased by the result. Because despite it all, she would abide by her decision, she would follow those hopeless star-crossed lovers to the very end. With a careful gaze, she turned to her "captors." "Now you have two choices: you can let me go or keep me here. But I warn you, my spiders have their orders. They will interfere with your plans regardless of my absence. Keep me here and you run the risk of my direct intervention." And if there was anything to do now, at the very least she could negotiate. "Soâ€|what will it be?"

The Guardians looked to each other until Bunny raised a paw and gave the verdict: "Jus' let her go, North."

"If you insistâ€|" the man in red murmured, reaching into his robe pocket for a twinkling orb of color and wonder.

"Thank you for the lovely visit," she said stonily, watching with equal interest as North lobbed the implosive device in her direction. There was a faint shimmer of sparks before the same gyres of light erupted from what was once empty space. Wordlessly, she faced her escape, a creature without honor to even form a proper farewell.

So instead, Bunny tried one for her: "You're a _coward_, Cupid. A bloody coward and with a pathetic shell of a heart. Your life, your existence is a _sham_."

She turned to him, and there on her face was the sincerest smile she could muster. "And I agree with you wholeheartedly!" The woman laughed airily as she leaped through the portalâ€|a bewildering glimpse of her old self, a shadow of happiness that she once held feebly in her hands.

Because how could she not agree? Many truths exist in the world, all with infinite perspectivesâ€|all but this. And how could it not?â€|so many people have lost faith in _love_, lost faith in _her_. When love exists as nothing but a word that subsists merely to manipulate lust and to rob the illusions of innocence, then how could it be nothing more than a cruel and twisted joke? Romance is foregone and lives only in her memoirs, littered with the shards of broken hearts. It was so much easier to simply hide away, use the secrets to hold the heart under lock and key. Toothiana was wrongâ€|so, so, very wrong.

It was not love that held the world together—it was secrets. Little threads of white lies woven to bind doomed souls together.

When her vision cleared, the red tinges of dawn painted her chambers in hues of passion and heartbreak. She moved to the bed, nearly collapsing on sheets of silk and satin, musing on threads, spiders, love, and those two poor boys.

How far she had fallen—drained of her energy as the cynics and skeptics multiplied—but Jack, poor Jack, she thought. The little secret she selfishly veiled from the other Guardians—that he had found love, a sweet, beautiful love, and held onto it with a desperate grasp, ruby-red silks trailing after the unsure and unseeing boy who had inadvertently stolen the Winter Guardian's heart. The boy who didn't know if he believed in love, in finding this exalted, mythical 'the one'...

But that annoyance was back—stealing her thoughts away and forcing troubling implications to her attention: 'But he did find the mythical Jack Frost'—

"And would no sooner lose him!" How long? How long had she waited and now—that misery Aster talked about was back. Something ached, stung in her eyes like centuries rushing through her thoughts, burning her skin and secrets painfully stripped from her clutches. Her fingers clenched into a fist, nearly drawing blood as her nails dug into her flesh at the frustration—and despair. "Damnit!" They weren't tears—no, those dried from her eyes a long time ago. "It's already too late—for all of them—" and her voice trailed off.

'And for me as well'—

"Sight's the first to go, huh?" She laid in the bed for just a few moments longer, eyes enervated and mind in chaos; not a good way to start the work day. "Well—isn't that just my luck—" A bitter laugh escaped her, choked by what could have been a sorrowful sob. But that was impossible. Hollow hearts knew nothing of sadness. "The purest emotion I've seen in a long time—such a long, long time—is doomed from the start—"

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Jack knew the peace was doomed from the start.

Upon the first moments of waking, he found his limbs delightfully tangled with his bedmate, warm against his cold skin, dozing on peacefully while ignorant of the disquieting clamor downstairs. If ignorance was bliss, then denial must be some kind of heaven—made only of the other's steady breaths and occasional murmurs from vivid reveries that danced behind his eyes. The Guardian's mind wandered to how he and Hiccup came to this—pleasingly odd position, but he chalked that one up to good fortune that the teen's sleeping habits often countered his conscious dislike of snuggling. So, making the best of his time with a Hiccup that was more agreeable to the physical contact, Jack pressed impossibly closer to the teen, glad no one else was there to witness the grossly saccharine moment—and couldn't help but to think that right then—they fit perfectly together.

A key and lockâ€¦

â€¦like the lock on the bedroom door jingling like someone was trying toâ€¦

Jack started, eyes wide open, and proceeded to shake the still-snoozing boy back to awareness. "Hiccupâ€¦Hiccup, c'mon nowâ€¦" The brunet, although not complying, cuddled closer and the small bear in his clutches became apparent. And as heartwarming as it was, the situation demanded the little polar bear to be tucked away before Hiccup's dad could question of its originsâ€¦and its purpose.

"Ngghâ€¦_five_â€¦_minutes, Dad_â€¦" Hiccup then proceeded roll over onto the Guardian, almost in retaliation, and buried his head into the crook of his neck in search for warmth. Unfortunately for him, he would not find it in the Winter Spirit. Still, with said spirit's arms wrapping around his back, it was kind of hard to pull away.

So what if Jack's resistance crumbled? It wasn't (too) often something like this happened. "I dunno what you just said," '_Although it sounded really cuteâ€¦even if you did call me Pappa'*_ "but you gotta wake up! Before yourâ€¦"

"G'mornin', Hikke!" Stoick cheerfully greeted. He pushed through the door, nearly banging the wood against a nearby table; not that the man seemed to notice as he (forcefully) tugged the sheets from his son's quivering form. Jack had tactfully leaped from the mattress the moment the teen's father barged in. Even if he couldn't see him, it still was quite inappropriate to be caught in your crush's bed by their parent.

The lights were flicked on and all expectations of sleep were promptly crushed. "Ackâ€¦what? Dad?" This was not a good way to start a school day; blinking the sleep from his eyes, the fuzziness of the brunet's vision sharpened to take in his father's smiling face and a shadow looming behind him.

"See? Told ya," said shadow continued with a chastising tone.

Hiccup was vaguely aware that his father was shaking him awake; he knew so because it was making him nauseous. "It's the big day, son. Ya best get dressed now for an early start!" He really wished he could share his father's enthusiasm.

But the lethargic teen could only collapse back on his pillows and curl himself into a ball to retain body heat. Stoick just let the boy shift around; it wouldn't be long before his son realized it was futile. Squinting his eyes through the blazing luminosity of his bedroom lights, Hiccup regarded the red blotch that he supposed was his dad with a, "Mhffâ€¦how early are we talking?"

The large man shrugged, folding the blanket and setting it aside far enough so Hiccup wouldn't be encouraged to slip back under them. "Ohâ€¦jus' a few hours."

"_Hours_?" The whine bordered a pained cry, muffled by planting his face stubbornly into a pillowâ€¦ but at least the boy seemed far more awake due to the disgruntling fact.

After seeing his son (reluctantly) shuffling out of the warm comfort of his bed, the smell of burning meat then demanded Stoick's attention. He turned towards the entryway, hoping not to make it too obvious that he was rushing. "I'll see you down in a bit!"

There was a resounding slam that nearly shook the room after the teen's father closed the door, but Jack was sure with his immense size, Hiccup's dad probably didn't intend to crack some of the house's foundation.

After a moment or so and still without the fire alarm going off, Jack felt it was finally safe to comment: "Well he sure is enthusiastic."

Hiccup sat up by the side of the bed, still rubbing the remnants of slumber from his eyes. "Mhmâ€¦with school to keep me busy, he won't have to worry about me running around and doing something that'll get me killed." He stretched, yawning widely as he popped the stiffness from his limbs. A casual glance outside still revealed an inky blue that buried stars, seeming fit to burst as the first tinges of sun beams budded over the horizon.

"Like hanging around the Guardian of Fun?" Jack offered with a small smile. And for the most part, he was joking; Jack was not the one to put _fun_ in _funeral._ He shrugged. "At least he cares."

Hiccup chuckled and unsteadily pushed himself off the bed and onto the new day. "Yeahâ€¦he does."*

And the morning routine started with Jack turning away as Hiccup fled behind the protection of the wardrobe's doors, dressed for school, and all the while glaring sullenly at his backpack; it certainly was fit for an adventure to embark on the wonderful world of education. And suddenly, something more than the shallow depression of an ending vacation sunk into his skin. He took a discreet look at Jack and idly pondered if it had anything to do with himâ€¦the boy of winter's fun and magic and all the things he was taught to leave behind as he traversed down life's road. Andâ€¦to the dreadful possibility that such a day would be approaching sooner than he could bare. And maybe he'd have toâ€¦maybe he'd have to say goodbye to Jack and his laughter and his company and the smiles he heard from his voiceâ€¦but not without seeing him first.

Because something in his heart pulsed with ache at saying goodbye without a face to remember. So, as Jack had promised, there was still time. Time for them to be, time for them to have their days in snowy forests and in cozy beds, with Jamie, Sophie, and the other children of this small Burgess neighborhood, and maybe that would be enoughâ€¦|

But whether Hiccup wanted to acknowledge it or not, something that raced through his veins when Jack was nearby, something that leaped in his throat when Jack said something that might or might not imply something else, something that lit his nerves on fire when he felt any sort of touch from the shadowy figure, something that made him impossibly happy but made him want to hide it all away, something that Hiccup wanted desperately, masked by friendly gestures and sarcasm, wanted none of it to end. Because what they had, whatever it was, was what Jack wanted, and it was what _he_ wanted.

Sadly, he was a little too realistic to know that such a thing wasn't possible.

And from a sky that neither of them could reach but that only a window could paint, dawn exploded forth.

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The winter winds were gentler now, almost billowing flakes and frost across town with a sigh of solemnity that dulled the morning scenery with obstinate clouds of gray that refused to hasten its leisurely pace across the sky. It was still rather early in the hour but the atmosphere divulged in a weakening of the Guardian's icy grasp upon his season, though his reign's end still loomed more than a month away. It was concluding, he knew. But as he thought this, he couldn't help the dread that consumed a corner in his mind, that perhaps spring might mark the finale of something more than just his season. But he scolded himself for allowing such gloomy thoughts to weigh down an already gloomy morning. So he turned to his silent companion with a forced smile, attempting to reinvigorate the air.

"Quite a hearty breakfast, huh?" He purposely allowed his elbow to knock against the brunet's. "You'd think your dad was cooking you your last meal!" And surprisingly, no, this time Jack was not exaggerating.

There was a weak laugh from Hiccup, but it was a start. "Yeahâ€¦thanks for swiping the last dozen of that bacon. I didn't think he meant it when he said I couldn't leave until I ate everything." He frowned but shrugged, letting the episode slide; he swore his father needed to be more conscious of his size and age for the good of his health.*

"My pleasure," the Ice Spirit grinned, patting his belly happily. He then took a sharp look at Hiccup's thin frame. "You know, you're a growing boy; maybe you should've taken that bacon." Yes, he did poke Hiccup's side, snickering in amusement as the teen cringed and batted the shadowy hand away.

"Yeah, what was that you said, '_more of me to squeeze'_" the teen huffed, walking a bit farther away from the Winter Guardian. If it was so Jack couldn't see the splotch of red blooming on his cheeks, Hiccup was doing a pretty bad job of hiding it.

"Well it would make it easier," the Winter Spirit professed. "But I'd still keep this around of courseâ€¦"just in case~" he sang as he teasingly cuddled the stuffed polar bear. What? No one else was there; Hiccup wasn't even using his phone.

The palm slapped against his face did nothing at all to cover the still apparent blush. "I still can't believe you brought it with you."

"And I still can't believe you bought it~" It was fun embarrassing the teen, Jack couldn't deny that. Maybe it was a bit sadistic, but it made his freckles stand out and his eyes got this fierce little spark in them, and yes, Jack had to admit, Hiccup was pretty damn cute when he got flustered.

"You're never gonna let that go, are you." It was a rhetorical

question; the deadpan glare from the teen revealed it as such; his mortification over the little purchase had yet to cease coloring his face, however. He also didn't move away when Jack recovered the close proximity between them.

"Nope!" and at the simple reply, the beginnings of a smile formed against the teen's lips. And they were all right again, the tension from the morning easing its way to the backdrop of sleepy towns and light snowfall. It was their own little world once more, of cold winter days and fluttering warmth in blissful contrast, the intimacy of its population of two being anything but desponding. Wait, actually, make that three. "And that goes for this little guy tooâ€|" he continued lightly, albeit the declaration was indeed quite truthful.

The brunet outright refused to look Jack in the face. "I-it's just a bear."

"A bear that you gave me," Jack firmly stated.

"Doesâ€|that make it special?" The Guardian didn't have to see Hiccup's face to know that mixed in the shades of pink on the teen's face were tints of insecurity over what the next answer could possibly be as delicate fingers played with the hem of his sleeve and his eyes were cast down to the ground in seeming concentration.

So it was no surprise that Jack's answer had to be: "Of course! For a smart guy, that was a pretty dumb question to ask." And it really was. What in Hiccup's mind led him to think anything dealing with the other teen was anything less than special to the Guardian?

It may have been a gasp, it may have been just an intake of breath, or maybe it was an initiating of something the teen wasn't sure he was ready to let slip just yet: "I-it's justâ€|nothing, nevermind." But if the tiny grin he succeeded in hiding from the Winter Spirit this time disclosed anything, he was pleased at the answer all the same.

It was at these times that Jack really hated Hiccup's timidity. "What? C'mon, not this again," he whined. Because no doubt, it was something he really wanted to hear (or could possibly be what he had been waiting to hear?).

"You think we're almost there?" the teen asked quietly.

"Almost?â€|" As quickly as it was sparked, the apprehension and elation plummeted not a second later.

>"Oh. The school," Jack lamely replied. Of course he meant that. Of course he didn't mean what Jack thought (hoped) it meantâ€|because the other teen didn't know about it. Didn't know about how Jack felt about him and the careful but precious steps the Guardian took to be closer to the teen. Didn't know that they danced around in baffling and wonderful little promenades that drew them together and apart every overture.<p>

"Yeahâ€|the school." But there was something in the teen's voice that made the Guardian rethink the earlier statement as simply just another diversion. It was still somewhat daunting that the brunet could hide so much behind eyes that were so bright and expressive and yet grew dismal so quickly like unpolished glass that reflected

nothing but murky light.

Jack resisted the urge to sigh. "Yeah, just a few more minutes I think."

The teen bit his lip, slowing his steps just a tiny bit. "Okayâ€¦"

A quick glance was enough to answer his following question: "Nervous again?" The Ice Spirit shook his head. What Jack wouldn't do to give the boy a hugâ€¦it looked like he really needed one too.

"A little," he admitted with a shaky laugh.

"Don't be." So maybe a pat on the back would be just as good. Besides, "And if any kids pick on you, just tell me and I'll hunt them down like the rats they are," Jack eloquently informed. No, the Winter Spirit was actually quite serious about that; anyone messing with his brunet (yes his), other than himself, naturally, would suffer serious consequencesâ€¦

Why yes, Jack certainly did play favorites.

Now that brought a genuine smile to the teen's face as well as a mocking chuckle. "And what? Plague them with bombardments of snowballs at every opportunity and hail their houses?"

Jack shrugged; that was actually a good idea. "Well, that's a startâ€¦" Though Jack believed marauding them would be pretty fun too. If Hiccup saw him as a ghost, then he was pretty sure he'd be able to play the part.

Hiccup snorted. "Good to knowâ€¦but I think it'll be all right," he reassured with a sarcastic smirk.

"All right, all right," the Ice Spirit relented. "But you knowâ€¦if you ever need anything, I'll be here." He placed his hand on the teen's shoulder, wondering if he could feel his touch and sense the meaning behind it; because Jack spoke nothing but his honest truth behind those words. He would be there, no matter whatâ€¦he already vowed the night before.

"I know, Jackâ€¦" And Hiccup's smaller hand covered his own, boldly giving his fingers a light squeeze. "I'll be here tooâ€¦if you need me."

The Guardian let his hand drop, and for a few moments longer, entwined his finger's with the brunet's, his skin feeling their warmth, silently wishing his own could provide Hiccup with the same tender comfort. "Good." For a brief moment, he had viridian eyes all to himself and that obnoxious fluttery feeling that reminded him of thousands of fireflies lighting the air ablaze like lanterns to find the one in frantic cycles, calling desperately for that one other to seeâ€¦and that strange and amazing feeling ended far too early for Jack's liking.

"Well, there it isâ€¦" and the teen's stare was stolen away by the gloomy structure a block away, surrounded with naked trees and an American flag billowing in the winter breeze at the front ; near the center of the school entrance, a stone slab engraved with the words "Thaddeus High" glared back. Although it wasn't deemed large by most,

the two-story black and bronze building was definitely bigger than Hiccup's school back at Berk. "Yupâ€¦" the teen took a breath and blew it out noisily, knees buckling, and groaning weakly; it was best to get it out of the system now.

With his other arm, he drew the teen to an awkward one-armed embrace; this time, he really did need it. "Just remember what your dad saidâ€¦and chuck it out your mental window. You'll do great! Justâ€¦I don't know, be yourself and let whatever happensâ€¦happen." And maybe those words of wisdom were for more than this occasion. Maybe.

Hiccup shot him a wry smile. "You sure that's good advice for school?"

Okay fine. "Study hard and don't piss off your teachers?" Jack proposed.

"Better," the teen supposed.

They stood for a while longer before the reality of it all began to sink in. "Wellâ€¦I guess I should get going. As nice as it would be to hang around a center for learning, I don't think it'd be a good idea to freak out the other students and make them think you're a witch or something." Jack did actually think about going to the school with himâ€¦but after running a few scenarios through his mind (mostly relating to that turkey and runaway slab of pork from yesterday), it was clearly not the better option. Plus, it wasn't like Jack would be left with nothing better to do when Hiccup was busyâ€¦or something. '_Well doesn't that sound familiar?_' an exasperating voice taunted.

"How thoughtful of you," Hiccup returned drily.

Jack grinned. "Isn't it?" His thumb brushed over the teen's knuckles one last time. "Well, erâ€¦I'll be at your place later on, uhâ€¦"

But Hiccup wasn't too quick to let him leave just yet. "Do you mind meeting me here?" All thoughts of letting go were quickly dispersed as the brunet nervously met his gaze. "A-after schoolâ€¦I meanâ€¦n-not that you have toâ€¦"

"Sure!" And maybe he said that too quickly with a bit too much enthusiasm. "W-what time?" Oh well; it's not like Jack minded anymore.

"I heard it lets out at four," he replied quietly, cheeks coloring quite a lovely shade of pink.

As if Jack could say no to that. "Okayâ€¦I'll be here."

"And Jack?" Suddenly, it seemed as their faces were closer than before and he could almost trace patterns on Hiccup's freckles with every exhale he took, a collection of little wishes on the brunet's skin and bright eyes of midday forests that reflected his orbs of ice blue within the pool of black in the middle. His lips seemed softer today, his tongue darting to the corner of his mouth and disappearing back behind his petal-pink lips, and Jack idly wondered if the teen's mouth was as warm and inviting as itâ€¦"

Needless to say, it took a while for him to find his voice.
"Y-yeah?"

There was one last press to his hand, a sudden reminder that they had yet to let go. "Thanks." And maybe because it was in the teen's nature, maybe due to his request, and maybe for the same reason why he didn't say anything or untangle his fingers from the Guardian's, that Hiccup hastily took off towards the ominous-looking building, a shy bustle in his step.

And Jack was smiling like an idiot again, not even caring that Hiccup probably couldn't hear him. "No problemâ€¦" He patted his hands against his cheeks, feeling the remaining heat from his skin there and trying to relieve it at the same time. He wondered if Hiccup knew he wasn't the only one whose face turned tomato-red when they were together. "I'll be waiting!" he futilely reminded with a little wave as he could no longer spot the teen in sight.

He was alone again.

The sky darkened considerably, the light gone from the day's eyes. The atmosphere brooded and chilling winds began to stir with unspoken anxieties that smeared the white tranquility of moments ago, bringing with it an impending echo of surmounting desolation. Even as mental encouragements endeavored to chase away the phantoms of doubt and dread, the uneasy sensation that settled itself at the pit of his stomach refused to fade with the promises that reverberated in his mind. Jack stood there for a while, watching as other teens entered the school's threshold and already a horrible clench in his chest made him wonder what Hiccup's steps away from the Guardian and towards adulthood could bring.

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"So, have you said anything to him yet?"

There came a sigh from Jack, irritation and embarrassment mixing to form quite a unique hybrid of an expression. "Jamie, what have I told you?" He leaned back against the wall as he sat cross-legged on the floor, idly playing with the staff he stored in Jamie's room for safe keeping. Okay, in retrospect, leaving a weapon in a child's room was a bad ideaâ€¦but Jamie was responsible enough!

Although that hole in the wall certainly wasn't there a few days agoâ€¦maybe it was best not to think about it too much. "That you'd rather eat a venomous spider before you tell Hiccup you have a crush on him?" the boy quipped. He then frowned as Sophie came dangerously close to demolishing another one of his own toy-creations in an attempt to be "inventive" with them like her big brother. "Hey, now _Soph!"_

"Yup," the Guardian replied with a resounding pop, not even flinching as bits of plastic flew into the air.

Sophie made a face, bordering disgust and disinterest. "Yeuch." Whether she meant about the spiders or of the poor toy's current state, neither males knew.

Jamie just shook his head; he'd find something else for the poor

Monstrous Nightmare*. Instead, he turned to his friend who seemed in _dire_ need of support right now. "Then how you do expect to go out with him!" He might be nine, but even _he_ knew that Jack would never get anywhere without making an _actual_ move.

Darn. The kid had a pointâ€|"I don't know! I-I didn't say that I'd _never_ tell himâ€|" '_Because what kind of awkward and sad relationship would that beâ€|'_ "Butâ€|"it's not the right time!" the Winter Spirit defended.

Jamie made a short mental conference with his sister, both siblings sharing brief eye contact and then returning their gazes to Jack. "And when _will_ you know the right time?" the elder Bennett pressed.

It was then in that sudden moment that Jack knew why people bemoaned a child's curiosityâ€|or their knack for coming up with questions that adults couldn't answer very well. All the same, Jack exhaled, letting a few snowflakes drift to the open air, the small flurries with no wind to catch them danced until they vanished. The Winter Guardian moved his fingers against the familiar gnarls and ridges of the wood, still emanating winter's breath after all these years, the one pillar he could lean on. "Whenâ€|when I know he feels the sameâ€|" he murmured, holding the staff close. '_If he feels the sameâ€|'_ _How Jack did _loathe_ being insecure; it was definitely not a fun experience at all.

"But what if he already does?" Those hopeful and trusting eyes were bright with optimism and how the Guardian envied that. The siblings both seemed to be in concurrence as Sophie gave the Ice Spirit a lopsided grin of encouragement. And her brother just seemed to burst with ideas: "I know! You should take him out on a real date! That's sure to get him to realize it!"

"What?" Jack visibly cringed; oh here it goes againâ€|

"Yeah!" Jamie beamed from ear to ear and the Winter Spirit felt himself shrivel under whatever expectations the boy had in store for him. "Mom watches those movies all the time! There was one where this guy went off and got this really coolâ€|"

"Jamie, Jamie! Hold on there, kiddoâ€|" The Ice Spirit had a feeling he wouldn't like the direction their conversation was heading. He was certainly right. "Nowâ€|shouldn't I tell him I like him first_ before_ doing that?" he countered a bit desperately.

"Ohâ€|" The boy deflated for a second before smiling brightly. "Well that's why you should tell him!" he reaffirmed.

Jack knocked his head backwards against the wall, feeling he deserved the resounding thud and headache that followed. "Augh, well I walked right into that oneâ€|" '_Even though we're going in circles hereâ€|'_ _The teen shot the boy an imploring look. "_Jamie_, I told you. Iâ€|"

"You held his hand, didn't you?" And _now_ Jack was beginning to regret telling him that in the first place.

Flushing lightly, the spirit replied, "Well, yeahâ€|" Well, at least he _tried_ to replyâ€|

"And you two are really close, right?" Jamie continued with a fierce gleam in his eyes.

The Guardian had a feeling he wasn't exactly allowed to rule the limitations to his answers. "I guess, but I'm still notâ€"

"And he makes you happy, right?" Yes, he was right.

But the poor guy tried anyways. "Yeah, he does but you'reâ€"

"And you make him happy?" the nine-year-old demanded. Even little Sophie sent Jack a challenging glare.

Why did the Bennett kids seem to suddenly enjoy ganging up on him about this? "I-I think so, butâ€"

"So why all the 'but's?" the eldest Bennett argued. "Why is it so hard?"

"I DON'T KNOW!" It took perhaps a moment to register to the Guardian of the outburst. Mood worsened by the fact that he just yelled at two of his first Believers made him want to shrink beneath the floorboards, out of sight from their aghast faces. "Iâ€|I don't knowâ€|" he repeated softly. And how could he? Just the same with Hiccup, his world had gone topsy-turvy the moment he met the boy with evergreen eyes, the moment he caught himself staring at the other boy's small frame and auburn hair that shifted in hues of red at day's end, the moment he realized he wanted something more from the freckled boy with crooked smiles that made his pulse race with a simple glance in his direction than just friendship, the moment he realized that maybe that the song that played rapid and exhilarating rhythms in his heart wasn't the simple melody of a crushâ€"

It was composed of staccatos in the other teen's laughter, the nocturne of their affection, and the crescendo of Jack's heartbeat that follows; the allegro of their little adventures leading to the refrain of those three pivotal words that played in resonance to the Guardian's heartstrings; the legatos of their banters, the duet of their grins, the vivace of the Guardian's spirit, and the sweet coda of their "goodnights" that composed the Sonata of Winter's Romance.

And it was complicated. At least, this part was. Because everything else just came so naturallyâ€|

"Sorry Jackâ€|" Jamie mumbled, gazing apologetically to the pensive Guardian.

"No, Jamieâ€|you're rightâ€|" He sighed once more and cast his gaze down to the little bear he cradled on his lap. Its blank gaze returned his, black, button eyes shining to give an almost owlish appearance that withheld answers from those who sought them. Jack chuckled; Hiccup was the same way. "Seems like he gets farther with me than I do with himâ€|he even gave me this little thingâ€|" He snorted as he played with the polyester plush, unconsciously giving the small arm a soft squeeze.

"He got you a present?" Ice blue eyes widened; oh noâ€|he knew he recognized that tone.

And sure enough, Jamie and Sophie were both peering from their perch atop the elder's bed with excited eyes aimed at the toy in Jack's hands. And for the millionth time that week, Jack felt his face heat up with mortification. "Itâ€"uh, well _yeah_ but itâ€"it was a strictly_ platonic gesture!â€" "

"He still got you a bear!" the boy trilled with enthusiasm.

"_And_?" That was actually a bad question to ask at this point. Not that Jack would ever learn.

"'_And'_ he gave you a present! Couples do that all the time!" Jamie explained as though it were written in stone. Beside him, Sophie gave little giggles at the Ice Spirit, the latter still holding the toy indignantly.

"S-so do friends!" Jack hesitantly qualified.

Ignoring the teen, the eldest Bennett turned to the youngest with a doubtful look. "Yannoâ€"maybe we got it all wrong, Sophâ€" " The little sister cocked her head to the side, uncertain of her brother's implication.

The Guardian pouted. "Hey, are you even listening to me?"

"Maybe Jack's the _girl_ in this one?" He tactfully hid a sly grin though he could do nothing to control his sister's tiny bursts of laughter. "Maybe that's why he's not listening to us and nothing's workingâ€" "

The Ice Spirit gasped, thoroughly offended. "_Excuse me?"_ Oh _hell_ no. They did not justâ€" "If anything, _he_ is!" It took perhaps a second too late before he registered his own words and about three more before he could stop the mental checklist list of certain aspects of Hiccup that could possibly be considered feminineâ€"and subsequently five more seconds before Jack reddened at a fewâ€" _images_ (one of them concerning the other teen in certainâ€" _inappropriate attire_) that wormed their way to his brain. The Guardian coughed and dispelled them immediately. "I-I mean were both guys. No one's a girl here." (Even if Jack considered himself the "_chaser_" of this relationshipâ€") So without looking at either of the Bennett children (as his cheeks were still burning red), he huffed and grumbled, "And if anyone's not listening, it's you two."

If any of the aforementioned _two_ even paid notice to the sulking Guardian, it was quickly exterminated by a call from downstairs by their mother: "Jamie, Sophie! Breakfast is ready!" The pair rolled towards the doorway, listening to the impending footfalls before Mrs. Bennett walked into the room and regarded her children with a chiding tone. "Really you two, just because that blizzard canceled school for another few days doesn't mean you guys can just lounge around all morning."

"Okay mom!" Jamie announced, grinning as his mother's stern face broke into a smile. Sophie hopped down from the bed and raced to her mother's side, small fingers still holding onto the remains of the dragon, with Jamie trailing behind not long after. "So what's for breakfast?"

"Ah, who was I kidding?" Jack sighed as he watched the pair retreat down the stairs into the kitchen, the house already permeated with the welcoming and cozy aroma of pancakes and eggs. As much as he loved them, Jamie and Sophie were still kids.

Kids who never had to deal with the intricacies of courting.

A flicker of amusement played across his features at the rewinding of a memory not too long ago; Hiccup had been the one to "court" that little beast of his. What was it that he said?

"I guess it's the same with people; you spend time with them, learn their likes and dislikes, a present here or there to let them know that you mean no harm, and show that you're willing to trust them in return."

Well, he definitely spent a lot of time with the guy; in fact, this was their first real separation since; when was it? Oh, right. Their first date, as his traitorous mind deemed it. Likes and dislikes? Nothing much to list there...other than the fact that Hiccup (unfortunately) wasn't into cuddling when he was more than half-awake. And trust? Well, the guy obviously trusted him (they slept in the same bed after all), told him his past; let him into his world of draconic cats, wearisome but well-meaning fathers, and chasing winds down mountain slopes; of witty comments and dry humor, of soft smiles and cute blushes and Jack; Jack was; Jack was.

Not willing to tell Hiccup, not willing to leave himself vulnerable; not willing to give his heart completely to the one person, in the past three hundred years of phantom existence and wintry solitude, that made it ache like time and ice had never caused it to stop beating.

'A present?' his mind suggested before his thoughts traversed further down that dark road. And it served as a nice distraction; something to keep his mind off what he'll; eventually have to face.

Well, Hiccup had gotten him something; regardless of the initial intent of the little polar bear. And it was only fair, right? Plus, it was something to further embarrass the younger teen, and that occupation solely reserved by the Winter Spirit endowed him with much amusement (and internal fawning).

So why not? A present would do; to even the score (and to get the ball rolling with this courting thing). So when Jamie's mother announced that she'd be taking the siblings to the park in an hour, it provided him with time to think; and to plan his next move before Hiccup was let out of school.

And maybe the "trust" part could come later; when those annoying fears ebbed away and he could say those three small words out loud rather than listening to them on constant and sickening repeat in his own head.

But now, this question took priority:

What was he going to get him?

* * *

><p>Soâ€|was that reminiscent of The Fairly Odd Parents, or what? Well, to be honest, in the earlier chapters, that was what I was watching while I typed out the story, so this has been in my thoughts from way back. Butâ€|it's not the whole story. There's still a clue here and there that mayâ€"okay, I'll save the rest for later. But uhâ€|there are clues.<p>

Explanation time: No, I don't believe Hiccup (or Jack) to be girly or that a feminine and masculine personality is necessarily needed in a homosexual relationship (unlike what is typically portrayed in yaoi). I meanâ€|none of them are exactly considered manly in my bookhahaâ€"sorry, I digress. But I supposed it would take some getting used to for the guy-girl mentality to fade after such a long time for Jack, though he is more than welcoming to a relationship with Hiccup in this story. As for Jamie and Sophie, they're young so while they're open to it, their thoughts might lead them to draw assumptions based on what they see around them, so I think it's natural for them to say that one of the guys in a homosexual relationship is the "girl" while the other is the "guy" as it is considered closer to the "traditional" pairing.

Also, I was in band so hopefully those terms were accurate?

*= Fem minutter, pappa is what Google Translate resulted. It sounds cute to me.

*= Ranting time: Okay, I honestly don't like how some stories portray Stoick as an uncaring (to borderline abusive) parent. He does care about Hiccup and wants him, above all, safe, hence why he wasn't allowed to 'help' during dragon raids. Even Gobber tells him that he can't protect Hiccup forever. Some people forget that before he said, "You're not my son," in the movie, Hiccup first said, "I'm not one of them," throwing off his helmetâ€"what's left of his mother. Yes, there was a lot wrong with them, but they made so much progress that it's really not fair to throw it all away. If you follow "Dragons: Riders of Berk" they have grown so much closer and communicate so much better. The episode "Portrait of Hiccup as a Buff Young Man" highlights this. They're not perfect, but they do love each other. Every parent faces disappointment but that's mutual because every child wishes their parents listened more, but nonetheless, their relationship is neither antagonistic nor unfeeling, despite Stoick's name. After the movie development, it just became more apparent, in my opinionâ€| (this is really my opinion, but feel free to take it to heart if that is what you wishâ€|I'm just sayin'â€|in this story, Stoick isn't a bad guy.)

*=According to "Dragons: Riders of Berk" Hiccup would occasionally comment on Stoick the Vast's weight ("Viking for Hire"). There's also Hiccup's famous line of, "Eh, between you and me, the village could do with a little less feeding, don't you think?" in HTTYD.

*= If I'm not mistaken, there's a Monstrous Nightmare toy in Jamie's room in RotG.

â€|soâ€|I guess it's back to shorter chapters? (And longer A/Ns) Ahâ€|wellâ€|err, sorry about this oneâ€|

-crawls back into the abyss-

15. Happenstance and Havoc

Well, it seems as though my summer is drawing to a closeâ€¦ But I guess my lack of productivity could be at least explained by my acceptance into a medical program. As the colorful take of Anton Chekhov's quote goes, courtesy of my friend, _"Medicine is my spouse, English is my lover. When I tire of one, I spend the night with the other."_

Okay, I'm sorry. And I'm sorry about what's to come. Oh and there's something ****important ****I need for you all to read at the bottom.

Once again, a very sincere thank you to ****Just Call Me Endy ****for your enduring efforts for the betterment of this story and to all of you who have stuck with me throughout my endeavors. You all make writing more of a wonderful experience than it already is.

Also, to that one guest who replied in Tagalog: "Salamat! Sorry, dili ko ka esturia kaayo sa tagalong! Ka sabot ra ko sa bisaya, pero gamay ra (haha, I had to get my mom to help me with some parts of the review ^^; so I..uh hope you understand Bisaya!) Oh, baye ko (so that makes me an "ate" haha) ^^

****Disclaimer: ****I own nothing but a laptop and certain plot elements.

* * *

><p>Solitude remains a mute curse, a silent suffering, a morose and melancholic liberty whose only reprieve resides in the breaking of bonds, the emancipation of familiar burdens in exchange for an alien ache of emptiness. The stillness rings and reverberates off blank walls, a decidedly cold grasp enclosing around the psyche as all trails of thought lead to longing, warming touches of morning light never reaching the dark and desolate landscapes of loneliness. Solitude is a powerful thingâ€¦just as mistakes served as superior teachers to perfection, there came much to realize regarding the necessities of life. The Presence of another is balm for the soul, soothing and refreshing, a peace long forgotten until immersed in the senses like a timeless tune that was only briefly misplaced. Little talks become delicacies and the perpetuity of another's voice, a vital treasure. And _Love_; above all, there must be love. Within isolation, such an essential would fail to thrive, would wither away to dust, and would only taunt the heart with a ghost of its song. And one cannot live without the other; for love to flourish and blossom against the harshest winter, assurances and promises must devotedly tend to the fragile emotion.

Besides, it takes more than one to truly love.

"So, thought of anything yet?"

Jack sighed, willing his mind to remain grounded. "Nahâ€¦nothing so far." But he was glad all the same; willing to suffer with him through this vexing and perplexing riddle of romance were Jamie and

Sophie.

Despite the dreariness of the earlier hours, the mid-day sun expelled the haze of another impending snowfall. Still, the quivering uncertainty hung in the air, something not so easily absolved in the midst of January, a new start prompting while arrays of possibilities loomed around the corner. The park was a nice place to think, with only smaller children and accompanying parents present and frolicking in Jack's creationâ€”a little winter wonderland of slush and ice that gleamed like thousands of diamonds under the sun's beams. It was a nice place for thought, yes...though nevertheless, his thoughts came up empty-handed.

The Spirit exhaled the stress, hands in his pocket and idly playing with the little bear safely enclosed in his grip. Decisions, decisionsâ€”|

Jamie felt only slightly bad for his friend. He plopped down on the cold concrete of the circular fountain's rim, turning to the sullen spirit. "How 'bout flowers?" he offered as he kicked small mounds of snow from his shoe.

Jack snorted, a smirk beginning to form on his lips. "Right. Because just what he needs to come home to is a pretty little bouquet from a desperate Winter Spirit." He cringed at the mental image of him coerced into shoving a mess of roses into the teen's hands, or leaving them around his house like a lovesick stalkerâ€”|

And subsequently, those visions eventually led to the mortifying scenario of Hiccup coming home to a dark house, bemusedly following a trail of rose petals leading to his bed and to his absolute horrorâ€”Jack seductively posed atop his covers, naked, save for a blanket draped over his hips and a salacious wink sent in the stupefied brunet's direction, the Ice Spirit lewdly beckoning to him, '_Hey baby~'_

Oh God. No. Just no. Even if he couldn't see him, Jack would die of embarrassment if he ever had to do something like that. Even if the face Hiccup made would probably be worth it, nothing could compromise his resolution.

The boy gave Jack a worried look as the Guardian turned an unhealthy shade of red, expression caught somewhere between nausea and hilarity. Jamie shrugged it off. Maybe that was the face people made when they were in love.

After collecting himself and literally shaking that scarring scene from his mind, he turned to Jamie with an apologetic grin. "Sorry kiddo, but I don't think that'll work. Plus, flowers really aren't my thing."

"Frost flowers?" the boy quipped. He had read about them some years ago after finding the icy florals one late autumn a few years back. They were quite beautiful and entirely fitting for the pair.

Jack blinked. Wellâ€”|"Thatâ€”"may actually be a good idea." Because while he wasn't into greens, he was quite handy with his own frost formations and it was definitely amorous enough. But thinking about itâ€”| it would be just as bad if they were frost flowersâ€”|because Hiccup would definitely know who they came from. He again cringed

from reliving the same mortifying images, only this time, the flowers were iced blue. "_If_ we were already dating," Jack decided. No, if Jack had to embarrass himself, he would at least like to know Hiccup felt the same about him despite the mortifying display.

There was that hopeful look in the boy's eyes again. "You _will_ be?"

The Winter Guardian chuckled. "Not if I scare him off first." Frost flowersâ€|might come on a little too strong. The brunet was timid and awkward when it came to even _friendly_ affection and as cute as that was to Jack, that made approaching him all the more difficult. He wanted the teen to be at ease with him, not run at the very sight of the creepy shadow-thing that seemed to have developed an unhealthy attraction to him. "I needâ€|something not too obviousâ€|"

The boy hummed, watching from the corner of his eye as his mom chased Sophie through the park, his little sister clumsily wading through the snow. She looked cheerful and carefree in her naive life while their mother fretted about, yet while doing so, wearing a big smile. Together like that, they were happyâ€|oh, waitâ€| "How 'bout a stuffed animal so you guys can match?" Jack raised a brow as Jamie excitedly thought for a second for a good partner for Jack's little polar bear. "Like a cat orâ€|"

"Dragon?" Jack tried.

Jamie grinned, eyes alight at the prospect. "Yeah! He'll love it!"

The enthusiasm almost caught on. Almost. "Nahâ€|that won't work." Jack groaned and leaned further back, arms balancing him from falling into the park fixture.

"Why not?" The boy pouted; it seemed as though Jack was more than willing to veto his ideas rather than come up with any of his own.

"'Cause I'm broke," he explained plainly, a small laugh unexposed behind the absurdity of it all. "Guardians don't really have the need to carry around cashâ€|well unless you're Tooth but I don't wanna have to call in any favors." He shivered. '_How embarrassing would that be to explainâ€| "Hey Tooth! I kinda fell for someone and I wanted to give him a present to show him how much I adore him. Do you mind lending me some quarters to buy him a gift so I can woo the guy?_"' That thought was more terrifying than seducing the unwitting brunet in bed. Jack glanced down at his hoodie and shrugged. "That, and it wouldn't feel right to give him _stolen_ merchandise." Yeah, that's almost as bad as asking Tooth for the money.

"Ohâ€|" And now the kid was crestfallen; great. "Well, me and Sophie can pitch in!" he insisted. "I still have some Tooth Fairy money from earlier!"

That earned the boy a ruffle to his hair; it was a sweet gesture, but Jack wouldn't take it. Even if the incidents that led to the small riches was more or less his fault. "That's nice of ya, Jamie, and I appreciate itâ€|But I want to give him something from _me_, _you_ know?" And yes, it was sappy, and yes, he knew that Jamie was trying to stifle his giggles, but it was true. Jack wasn't what many would

call a romantic by natureâ€"but it wasn't exactly his fault that being around the brunet filled his brain with embarrassing thoughts, caused his body to flush, and to babble idiotically in such a way that could only be described as being so sickeningly enamored by the freckled teen. He would have cursed Hiccup to Hel and backâ€|if being so love-struck wasn't so wonderful. Because although it seemed to have happened way too fast to be possible, he knew what love was. It made itself known that first, fated glance at eyes of forest green and gave its name that magical day at the lake. It was a name that bespoke of terror and rhapsody, ensnared with its cruel vice and captivated his heart. He loved this teen. As impractical as it was, he knew it as none other than that frightening truth. So that's whyâ€|"That bear he gave me and what I'm going to give himâ€|they're going to have two totally different meanings behind themâ€|" Because Jack was in love and no matter what excuse he wanted to use for it, there was no denying the essential meaning of giving Hiccup a gift. It was partly from this dreaded "courting" business and partly because he wanted to. Wholly, it was for the guy he loved.

Jamie scratched his head, eyes trained on the snow and how it turned to slush against the daylight of the early afternoon. "This stuff sounds hard."

If that wasn't the understatement of the centuryâ€| Jack snickered weakly, eyes tracing the clouds floating sluggishly from the corners of the sky. "You bet, kiddo." Compared to this, defeating the Nightmare King was almost child's play.

"But maybe you're making it harder than it needs to be," the boy wisely proposed.

Jack frowned. "Hey, what's that supposed to mean!?"

.

For his plan to succeed, it demanded little room for error. It wasn't as though Bunny dismissed his colleagues' efforts, but unlike Tooth and North, he refused to be thwarted. Especially by Cupid. But aside from the bad blood between them, this wasn't some spat between immortalsâ€"this was warfare against a woman trained on leading one of their own to the same misery as she led so many others. He wasn't foolish enough to face her head-on. Love commanded more forces than what the Guardians had in their arsenal and after years of madness and isolation, Bunny could only assume she had grown increasingly hazardous and volatile. Plus, as begrudging as the fact of it was, she had a point: this was her jurisdiction. She had every right to interfere with their schemes. Certain laws in their world restricted their involvement after all, hence why subtlety remained as a focus.

But that didn't mean they couldn't find loopholes around it. They couldn't mess with loveâ€|but they could at least sway the heart.

He leaned against a sturdy fir, only slightly disgruntled by the fact that warm, live-giving Spring was still some ways away. "Righ'" he murmured to unseen eyes, only aware of the endless whites and peeking pines of the evergreens around him. "I'm in position."

The receiver crackled with static and made his sensitive ears twitch. "Okay, Bunnyâ€"they're in the left side, just by the fountain," came

Toothiana's voice.

His huff emitted a small fog of winter's breath; it was still the middle of the season and it seemed as though the world still slept on in the year's beginning months. The small thickets surrounding the public area gave for a good cover at least, a shroud of visually-infinite emptiness well-utilized for their operation. "'Kay, jus' gimme the signal when they head this way." Perfect for something vivid to catch the eye.

There was a sharp screech and Aster very nearly threw the small earbud to the floor at the painful frequency. "Why can you not just talk to Jack in front of children again?" North, unsurprisingly, was the root of his earache.

He swallowed his irritation. "Well, as much as I love the lil' ankle-biters, they probably love their _babysitter_ and Frost too. They'll jus' get upset if I tell 'im to leave." Getting Jamie and Sophie involved would no doubt make it harder to persuade Jack to abandon his stay at Burgess, and as much as Bunny hated to admit itâ€he had a soft-spot for the Bennett children. He shook his head. "It's better to show that joker he's done enough slackin'. _Spring_ is almost here and he'll have to wait another six months before gettin' another shot at spreadin' winter and fun."

There was a slight commotion before Tooth's voice rang in his ears, reserved tone tinged with flittering worry. "Are you going to ask Jack about the boy?"

Bunnymund paced the snow-laden ground, little sprigs of green sprouting in his path; restless eyes watched as wildflowers budded and bloomed under his ministrations. "Nahâ€we can't tear 'im from the boy's grasp." No, he learned the rules of romance long ago with his dealings with Cupid; there were certain lines that weren't meant to be crossed and if there was anything absolute about love, it was that hearts were prone to change, that love was just as vulnerable to fickle whims. Somewhere along the way, he also learned that sometimes, it wasn't just love that held people together and that so many other things could force them apart. A bitter resignation trickled into his thoughts before he tamped down the meandering musings. "Too much drama involved. I'd rather jus' rile 'im up to get 'im away from here." He gazed at the small field he had uncovered, a thin course of green snaking its way past the clearing and towards the outskirts of the park, blatant hints for a certain Ice Spirit to identify. "The separation'll take care o' the rest."

There was silence on the other end; an uneasiness settling at the pits of their stomachs. It would hurtâ€they knew that. It seemed like a long shot, but the world was vast and once devoted to destiny, it was difficult to let other facets interrupt. Immersing oneself in work was a good distraction and deemed a rewarding opportunity for Jack to achieve what he had always wanted: to be _seen_.

They knew this and it was about time Jack was reminded ofnwhy he came to be. "He's rounding the corner, Bunny," Tooth murmured, breath held, elapsed into a shaky admonition.

He nodded. "Good. I'm on it."

Because it was better if Jack forgot that boyâ€before that boy

forgot Jack.

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Chance worked in the strangest ways. In just a short amount of time, Jack questioned it more than he had in centuries since he awoke to the moon's light. It controlled divisions of his life, a puppeteer tugging the strings of fate, his own destiny a marionette to be toyed with. Yet the events that occurred beforehand seemed so ordinary that it almost seemed as though Chance selected its victims with dizzied fingers and arbitrarily threw haphazard events that completely threw off the course of one's life. A trip to Burgess to present Jamie and his friends with his presence and a customary snow day somehow led him to Hiccup. Meeting Hiccup eventually led him to be (and to realize he was) smitten with the teen. Chance appeared cruel and unusual, but so far, she had worked to his favor—but something else told Jack that it wasn't just Fortuna up to her eccentric schemes.

"—is that?" Because as far as Jack was concerned, the colorful blossom that seemed to glare in his direction couldn't possibly have been caused by a long-gone entity. '_That flower—'_

He frowned, only faintly registering Sophie trotting over to them to convince her brother to play as their mother retreated to a park bench, thoroughly exhausted by her lively daughter's antics; his thoughts solely fixated on that splash of color. Jack wasn't blind, nor was he delusional enough to dismiss the familiar flora he encountered just yesterday. Sure the incident was moved aside for further inspection when other pressing urgencies weren't cluttering his brain, but it still left him with a creeping sense of nervousness as to what it could mean.

"Hey, Jamie?" Jack called. His eyes were still trained on the violet-petaled floret, partially hidden away by decaying branches awaiting rebirth the next season. It made for a dramatic metaphor—but Jack wasn't concentrating on its symbolism.

"Yeah?"

"Can you—hold on for just a sec? I need to see something." No, what he was concentrating on was why it was there as the first suspicions of who placed it there were beginning to unfurl.

Jamie shrugged. "Sure Jack. Hey, Sophie! Where're you—"

The rest of the sentence didn't register in Jack's thoughts as he rounded the corner with a wary glance towards the contour of the park grounds. He was only mildly surprised to see small patches of lush green trailing behind the vibrant stalk, a few more colorful blooms awakening at his intrusion—or to guide him behind the silent thickets. He followed the deceptively delicate path, past a few pines and towering oaks that had shed its coat for the dying season. The noise of children's joy and parents' reprimands blurred and was eventually erased from the atmosphere and Jack wordlessly traversed down the foliated road, a growing apprehension of his own actions and what it would eventually lead to.

Jack sighed as his mind absorbed the calm, prompting thoughts to run

more efficiently. It wouldn't be the first time he had been led away to an eerie silence for an impromptu meeting. He decidedly shattered the still air after a moment. "Well, wellâ€¦looks like someone wants a little chat." He chuckled; he should've guessed it was the Easter Kangaroo from the very beginning. After all, who'd trample on his season like that from a grudge over that little blizzard decades ago? His face fell to a grimace; now he had to choose between deliberately ignoring the telltale signs of the short-fuse Guardian's request for a meetingâ€¦or to simply brave the outcome.

The former option goaded him to make a wise selection as he flushed at the thought about being confronted about hisâ€¦lack of productivityâ€¦and more importantly, at the thought of Aster seeing him with Hiccup during one of theirâ€¦sappier moments. He groaned. No doubt the Guardian of Hope would have connected the dots and no doubt Jack would be teased until the end of the century for it.

He paused mid-step, frowning. "â€¦_Bunny?_" he called tentatively; he didn't know what he was doing really. He just had the anxious feeling that he was being followedâ€¦and if the rustling of the frozen foliage behind him indicated anything, he was right. He swiveled around, half-expecting either Bunnymund or North's yetis after him. "Whatâ€¦"

Though he didn't really expect Sophie to pop out of the blueâ€¦well, white and green really, with a cheerful, "Jack!" as a greeting.

Jack very nearly breathed a word of gratitude. "Sophie!" No, Jack was definitely not relieved to find the three-year-old instead of the six-foot-some rabbit standing on his hind legs. It wasn't like he was beginning to dread conferencing with his fellow Guardianâ€¦or anything. The little girl giggled at his disoriented state and ran to his side, grinning. He picked her up, bringing her to his eye-level. "Hey, did ya follow me here?"

She shook her head, and offered him a peony, torn from its roots. "Followed flowers," she explained simply.

Jack rolled his eyes. Well, it was better to have companyâ€¦not that he _needed_ help when it came to dealing with Aster. "Oh yeah? Wanna see where the pretty flowers lead?" The blonde giggled again and wriggled out of his hold only to take his hand and dragged him off to where an impatient cluster of posies and daisies awaited their company. "Okay, let's go!" he laughed. If it was Bunny, then he'd be all right with Sophie tagging alongâ€¦

But if it wasn't Bunnyâ€¦

.

Robert Burns once wrote, "_The best-laid plans of mice and men often go awry_."* Bunny should've known that this rule applied to Pookas as well.

It was calm in the eye of the stormâ€¦before the cyclones of distress in Tooth's cry nearly deafened him. "Bunny, Jack's got Sophie with him!"

"Whaâ€¦augh, _really?_" His eardrum was throbbing and he was getting more and more annoyed by the minute. He took a shaky breath, dragging

his mind back to practiced meditations. Everything was _okay_â€” he'd just have to greet the girl and amply drag Jack away to have a talk. Hopefully he could amuse the youngest Bennett with some flowers or some eggsâ€”

"Bunnyâ€”there is something else..." this time, it was North's voice that broke through his thoughts, the thick accent grave and ominous.

"Ya gotta be kiddin' me," he seethed. "What else?"

"Bunnyâ€”you're not alone out there," Toothiana whispered.

His eyes narrowed, a faint trepidation thinning the air. "Whad'ya mean I'm not alone?" Of course he wasn't. He was near a _park_. There was bound to be a few woodland creatures or a few people up and about around the area.

"Somethingâ€”something just slipped past the cameras." There was a definite dread in the Tooth Fairy's tone, and though it went unsaid, they all inevitably reached the same conclusion upon her whispered claim: "And I don't think it's humanâ€”or animal."

'_Cupidâ€”the _devil_.' _"What? What's goin' on? Where's it headed?" He scanned the area, tapping the ground here and there for the reverberations to report back to him. There was nothing. "Here?" he demanded.

"Noâ€”to Jack!"

.

"_AAAHHHHH_!"

"Sophie, Sophie!" Jack silently cursed as he floated after the child. "Hold on hereâ€”" he murmured soothingly as he caught up to her, rubbing her back as she quivered with fright. "It was just a spider, okay?" He frowned. '_Admittedly a really, _really_ ugly oneâ€”' _but he made sure that the little girl didn't witness his discomfort at the monstrous creature. "It's not gonna hurt youâ€”" he reassured, gingerly plucking the girl off the snowy earth and hefting her in his arms until her small tremors ceased. '_At least I hope soâ€”it did look kind of poisonousâ€”' _But it wasn't like he was going to tell her that. He craned his neck, wincing at the sight of hoary threads and webs encasing a small forest path, a flower tangled in its eerie hold. Now, Jack wasn't an expert on spiders and their natural habitsâ€”but he was pretty sure it wasn't exactly normal for the creepy-crawlers to be up and about during his season.

She whimpered helplessly in his hold, not daring to open her eyes after the traumatizing scene. Eight beady eyes glaring back at her as a set of thin, skeletal legs dangled from a net scurried grotesquely to protect its territory of silk while inky dots scuttled and writhed against the petrifying mass of silvery-snares in the backgroundâ€”she started crying just thinking about it.

Jack just about panicked when she began her sobbing once more. "Shh, see? It's gone," he comforted. To be honest, he wasn't too sure if they were; either way, he wasn't going to go back and check it out. Arachnaphobic or not, those spiders were gross. "We probably

disturbed its home; that's why it jumped out at us," he clarified with some degree of expertise.

"Homeâ€|" she sniffled.

The Winter Spirit frowned in sympathy. "You wanna go home?" At that, she gave an enthusiastic nod, little streamlets of tears still trickling down her face. He sighed; well, if Bunny, or whoever it was, wanted to talk to him, then he'll just have to find him later. If not, then it probably wasn't all that important. "Okay, let's goâ€|"

Once again, Chance managed to meddle in his knotted threads of Fate.

He paused, bewildered as another path bloomed right before him; fragile little white roses blushing a pretty pink along its outer petals, an almost golden glow at its centerâ€|"an innocent beauty devoid of lustful hues and extravagant shades. They weren't rooted to the ground but instead seemed as though dropped carelessly, a delighted child discarding shy little secrets for another to find. Sophie quieted her sobbing, just as transfixed by the mystifying display as he was. "Hey, Sophâ€|"look! Those are some pretty flowers, huh?" Jack grinned when the girl, eyes dried of tears, nodded and inched towards the first of the fallen roses, delicate fingers tracing over the soft curls of a petal. He stood by her side, offering her his hand. "Let's go see where they leads us, okay? Then we can go." Hesitantly, she nodded.

Sure it might've been a bit irresponsible to follow that path; after all, this definitely wasn't Aster's doingâ€|"but he'd trust Chance or Fate this timeâ€|"because if the Man in the Moon deemed him worthy to becoming a Guardian, then a rabid horde of arachnids leading him to a trail of roses didn't seem all too farfetched. Besides, there was something alluring in those blossoms, its intent sealed behind inches of snow pulling him closer and closer to its purpose. He didn't know what it was, but something in those chaste shades told him it was not at all malicious.

They eventually led him into a small snow-blanketed clearing encased by towering trees, the last of the roses fading away into petals like shards of something once beautifully whole. The trail ended at a tree stump at the very heart of the area, almost in exhibition to the Guardian. There, perched on the snow-laden wood was something he couldn't quite make out from a distance. He cautiously approached the last of the flower-fragments, a waxen petal that almost melted into the snow's own arctic hues. Eyes of ice blue glanced to the earthy pedestal, a quiet contemplation at the item it relinquished to him. Was it for him to take?

With hesitant fingers, he grasped the silken material, surprised by the lavish feel of the lengthy strip of fabric. It was entrancing in its snow-shaded textile, intricately woven as indicated by the radiant sheen that almost mimicked his own glacial irises, shimmering from sunbeams spilling from the sky; the thickness of the scarf was surprising despite its weightlessness, further signifying its costly expense.

Sophie peeked behind the Winter Spirit and caressed the hem of the divine material. Jack turned the fabric over, whistling lowly. "Wow,

who'd leave this behind?" As if in reply, something was pocketed beneath the velvety texture, a stubborn and sage presence lingering to bestow a purpose. Jack supposed he shouldn't be so astonished; after all, a trail of flowers and ghastly arachnids led him here. "A cardâ€|" he murmured, eyebrow only slightly raised as he extracted the parchment and read aloud the pretty script inked onto the plain white in scarlet shades.

"_Consider yourself lucky;_

To you, my blessings lend.

Take itâ€"don't be haughty.

Give it to your boyfriend.

Love, Val.*

Jack snickered but he wouldn't deny how he suddenly felt very nervous, a thin layer of denial draped over a disquieting truth. He flipped the card over, somewhat hoping to get the identity of the recipient. His eyes widened and his jaw dropped along with his stomach.

P.S.

I'm with you on this, Frosty."

Okay, yeah. This definitely wasn't a coincidence.

It was one of those moments where Jack had to step back and reevaluate what just happened and what he had just read. One: He realized he strayed from his original path for a reasonâ€"that reason being to find this little present. Two: He was vaguely aware that he should be a bit more freaked out by this than he wasâ€|after all, a mysterious force with an awful sense of humor just left him a gift for his "boyfriend" (oh god, was he that transparent that even a complete stranger saw through his dilemma?) and called him by that irritable nickname. And three: although he knew he should be taking the fact that someone had been watching him and was aware of those obnoxiously fluttery feelings he had for Hiccup, this one facet still held itself above the rest:

"'_Val'_â€|" he murmured, turning over the card and finding nothing more than an intricate heart-shaped insignia etched beneath the benefactor's signature. "Why does that name sound soâ€"" The following epiphany smacked him in the face like proverbial construction material. He stared back at the name, three little letters signed in bigoted and fanciful loops, a memory of the Easter Bunny's disdain reflecting back at him. Unsurprisingly, the word "Cupid?" flew from his thoughts and out through his lips.

Well nowâ€|this definitely changed a few things.

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Jamie let out a sigh of relief. "Sophie! Jack! Where were you guys?"

The little girl dashed past her elder brother and towards her

panicking mother a little ways farther while the Frost Spirit lagged behind. "Ohâ€|hereâ€|and there," Jack mumbled, still a bit dazed at the prospect of the Deity of Love dropping by to aid him in his affairs.

Wait, did that mean he was in serious need of help?

The gleaming material sticking out from Jack's pocket didn't escape Jamie's curious eyes. "What's that?"

Jack, unknowing of what else to do, merely shrugged and handed him the scarf. "Apparentlyâ€|a gift for Hiccup." Apparently, it was also a cause for a mildly worrisome bout of paranoia.

Upon a closer look at the beautifully crafted winter accessory, Jamie's eyes lit up with sheer excitement. "Oh, it looks awesome!" Jack, however, got the feeling that he was more amazed by the fact that he somehow managed to find a gift at all. "Where'd you get it?"

"From Cupidâ€|I think." Did this count as a "divine intervention," by any chance?

"Woah! Cupid? The Cupid?" the boy gasped. Subsequently, that sharp intake of breath erupted into small giggles as the boy's innocent expression turned teasing. "See, Jack? Even he wants to get you and Hiccup together," he pointedly remarked.

The Winter Spirit scoffed nervously, reddening slightly and snatching back the gift. He idly twisted the velvety material for a moment in wonderment at the luxurious feel; he gathered himself before speaking. "First off, Jamie: Cupid's a girl. Yeahâ€|"weird, I know." Quite a shock to him too when he found out. But he supposed that was better than having a diaper-donning infant parading around with pointy projectiles aimed at people's hearts. Speaking of whichâ€|"Second, I don't see any arrows flyin' at us just yet, kiddo." At least Jack was pretty sure there weren't any. Vaguely sure.

He was at least certain his feelings for the teen were products of his own hopelessness, anyways. Not some convoluted concoction borne by some bored higher-power. Although that would explain some thingsâ€|

"Still, she helped you," the nine-year-old argued.

Well, that perspective was a lot more optimistic than his initial response. Jack shrugged. "I guessâ€|but I meanâ€|" does this even count? I said I wanted to give him something from â€|" As his eyes darted to the gift, the sentence and all its appeal plummeted to discontinuation. This little favor just seemed to be brimming with pleasant little shockers. Jack blinked once and then twice. Nope. Those really were little snowflakes of crystalline blue dotting the scarf upon his touch, seeming to dance as the material fluttered fluidly. "Huhâ€|would ya look at thatâ€|" he numbly murmured.

"Woah, that's so cool!" Jamie exclaimed, examining the little ice formations as they faded like footprints on sand a few moments later.

Jack ran a finger through the bare white, grinning lightly as elaborate patterns of frost and crystals dawned from his touch, yet the material remained warm. "Y-yeahâ€¦wellâ€¦I guess that sorta counts as '_from me'_ nowâ€¦"

"So are you gonna give it to him?" The broad grin and glittering eyes on the boy's face made it exceedingly difficult for Jack to say no.

Not that he was going to in the first place. "I suppose so." He chuckled, a pleasant defeat, a content surrender to Love's bizarre whims as he pocketed the scarf, not even bothering to chase after the card as it floated down like free-falling feathers. "Never a good idea to decline a gift from a '_Goddess'_ anyways," he sarcastically reasoned.

Instead, it was Jamie who fetched the ominous note, snickering at the quirky message as his eyes scanned the words. "Hehâ€¦'_boyfriend_.'" His smile fell to that of bemused contemplation as he turned to Jack. "Val?"

"Ah yeahâ€¦I think Bunny said her name wasâ€¦Valenciaâ€¦N-something-or-other Tine."* Jack wasn't too sure; all he knew was that whenever she was brought up, it sometimes took hours for the irate aura of the Easter Bunny to simmer away, so Jack hardly listened to whatever rant he was going off to save himself the headache.`

Jamie gave him an amused look. "Val. _N_. Tine?"

He knew he shouldn't poke fun at the gift-horse or slap the hand that fed him or whatever that expression was, but there was no stopping the chuckle that passed his lips. "Yeah, pretty corny right?"

"Sureâ€¦'_Frosty_." Jack really should have seen that one coming; Jamie laughed despite the weak glare from the Winter Guardian. The boy hummed softly, eyeing the note once more, a light giddiness bubbling from him as he regarded his troubled friend. "Still, pretty lucky huh?" Because if Jamie knew anything about legends, then Cupid's contribution definitely supported his case that Hiccup and Jack were _meant to be._

But he wouldn't tell Jack his little idea right now; the poor guy seemed to be still coming to grips about falling for his babysitter. "Yeahâ€¦definitely," the Ice Spirit mumbled and Jamie just beamed.

It was an oddity more than anything. Though he never met the Deity of Love, Jack was more than familiar with Bunnymund's incessant grumblings of the February Divinity whenever her name was thrown about. What little he could recall was that she rarely took to the field, perhaps preferring anonymous miracles under the guise of Fate's happenstance. It was a sad thing, really. The world needed her around more than anything, but she was quite elusive. Not once in his three hundred years did he catch a glimpse of the romantic recluse and now that she made herself known to him, maybe, just maybe his feelings for Hiccupâ€¦

He shook the thoughts from his head. '_No arrows just yet,'_ he

reminded himself. Still, though Jack didn't know much about her, he was certain of this much:

Gaining her favor was nothing short of a miracle as well as a rarity.

He smiled, beside himself, fingertips tracing over the crystalline blue of the silken snow of Hiccup's gift and Cupid's "blessing". Perhaps Chance, Fate, Love, or a quirky combination of all three put him on the right track after all.

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In all respects, Aster should have seen this coming.

His eyes narrowed to slits, darting from left to right, body tense, fingers hovering over the smooth wood of his boomerangs. The mass of scurrying and squirming blacks and countless beady eyes surrounding him from all sides stirred, agitated at the low growl from their prime target. "All righ' ya little devilsâ€|which one of you wants ta dance?" He drew his weapons, a dangerous gleam in his eyes as the Love Dwellers readied their frenzied formation.

"Bunny!" Said Guardian nearly groaned in frustration as Tooth's frantic voice blared through his ears.

"_What_," he gritted out, eyes never leaving the restless arachnids.

"Jack and the kids are already leaving!"

"_Cupid_â€|" he hissed before roaring in fury. "Show ya self!" Only the chirps and rustles of thousands of spider legs thrumming against the winter season answered his call. Their response?

Their departure.

Bunnymund sighed, posture that of defeat rather than respite. "They're retreatinâ€|" He looked on as the cloud of black that barricaded him slowly dispersed. He nearly swore. He could have fought themâ€"and he would have very well won. But that would further complicate the matters, and with a direct assault against Love's minions and her orders, he would have compromised their efforts of saving Jack by crossing the boundaries. He knew he had to be carefulâ€|but with Cupid up and about, no doubt dismissing much of her regular duties by her exceptional interest to Jack's state of affairs, it was difficult to select the correct timing.

He thought that now would have been the best time at such short noticeâ€"with her focus directed at the Burgess area, he predicted that she would be swamped by today at the onslaught of infatuations and relationship strains brought in by the influx of returning students and working staff members from high school, not to mention the ripple effect that would no doubt take place with so many more emotional and personal factors and variables fluctuating. But no, leave it to _this_ woman to shrug off her work in favor of what could not be. He chuckled, the sound dull and its meaning empty as he leaned against the same fir tree. She chased after her impulses like holding the wind in an embrace, praying it would remainâ€|obstinatelyâ€|and fruitlessly, the outcomes always

disastrous.

"It's okay, Bunny!" Toothiana consoled.

He nodded to himself, dropping the thought with practiced ease.
"Yeh!"

"I call next try!" boomed North's enthusiastic bellow.

Aster yelped as the shrill ringing in his ears continued.
"Wha!" _North_" he fumed.

"What? I believe it is _my_ turn now," the man huffed.

Bunny sputtered. "Ya had your chance with Cupid!" Really! The nerve of that guy!

"Yes, but not with meeting our friend!" came the defensive justification.

"Guys, I think Sandy says he wants a turn!" Toothiana added.

His normally calm demeanor crumbled beneath the chattering and bickering voices. "This isn't a game!" Just because they were the Guardian of children didn't mean that they had to act like them too.

"Then why are you fighting for it?" North demanded.

"AUGH!"

.

Jack would have denied the sense of elation and relief as he spotted the familiar head of auburn; unfortunately, the face under it was obscured by the pile of textbooks threatening to topple the teen over. He would have denied being amused, if not a little fond, of the sight of Hiccup bravely faring each and every swaying step, the Frost Spirit shaking his head at the other's hopelessness and at himself for his own. He would have denied taking some sadistic pleasure in floating right over to Hiccup, above the blur of faces and chatter around him to reach the struggling teen, and nearly scaring the daylights out of him by intently peeking over the hardcover of the top book and grinning down at his startled face. He would have denied the urge to rescue his little damsel as his unorthodox greeting very nearly ended in the heavy pile collapsing atop the brunet; though he was sure if he ever voiced Hiccup as such, it would earn him an infuriated glare and a scathing retort. And he would have denied the erratic way his heart thudded against his ribs at the sight of the relieved and thankful look in his eyes as their gazes met, especially when he spied a tender smile on the other boy's lips, and something he dared to hope was more than friendly affection beneath the subtle countenance. He would have; but at that point, he was already past that point and in so deep, to do so would have been entirely moot.

He grinned, descending to an empty spot beside the brunet. "Hey, Hiccup!" Said boy only nodded in reply as the floodgates crashed open and torrents of teenagers began to fill the once sparsely-occupied space around them, cluttering forward with menial chatter. Jack

sighed. "Soâ€|heavy load there huh?"

The teen grimaced, muttering under his breath as a few schoolmates brushed past him which very nearly sent him sprawling on the floor. "Ugh, tell me about itâ€|" Well, maybe now wasn't the time to bring up Jack's (and Cupid's) little giftâ€|but maybe he could lead up to it? From the weary look on Hiccup's face, the brunet really needed something to lighten the load.

Literally.

"Hey, uhm Iâ€"

Jack frowned as an enthusiastic teenybopper waltzed right through him. "_Hey Dennis! Are ya comin'_â€"

Hiccup seemed to direct a show of sympathy in his direction and in doing so, the Ice Spirit almost missed his reply of "What was that, Jack?"

Almost immediately, yet another teen bumped shoulders with Hiccup, an Algebra II textbook threatening to slip from his grasp. "_Araceli! Which period do you haveâ€"_"

Jack thoughtfully steadied him, not entirely minding the fact they were pressed closely together as the horde of grumbling and ecstatic teenagers surged homeward after the first day's death of winter break. "I saidâ€"

"_Dude, you got sewing?_" Okay, now Jack minded _that_. And by _that_, he meant the loud teen chortling noisily beside them as an exasperated peer glared daggers at him.

Hiccup sighed, a weary look in his eyes. "I can'tâ€"

"_Nothin' else fit in my schedule_" the other boy defended.

Jack felt like groaning. What was this, a contest to see who can interrupt them first? "Can weâ€"

"_Are you gonna have Mandy forâ€"_" Oh great. More contestants.

Ah well. At least Hiccup was at least trying to follow along. "What?"

"_No, she signed up for AP, but_â€"

Jack sighed. "Never mind." Sometimes, it was more honorable to accept defeat in the face of battle than risk losing the war. Or something like that.

The brunet either realized the futility of carrying out a conversation with an invisible boy in this crowded and confused mess or he was as exhausted as he looked; still, it lightened Jack's mood significantly when Hiccup gave him a tired smile, promising, "We'll talk in a bit."

Eventually, the crowd thinned, the rush of everyday nonsense pivoting away from the not-so-everyday impossibilities, and the pair eventually drifted off to stagnant streets, the silence a solace, a

tangent solitude worth savoring as the colors and noise melted like snow upon changing seasons to mold Jack's newfound favorite form of a Winter Wonderland: his and the brunet's own little world. A world that dutifully masked the flaws of his unbridled hopes in exchange for pretty little dreams that warranted absolutely nothing in the end.

Because Love is the heart's gamble, a soul's commitment while Fate, Chance, and Choice cycled in their blessings and curses, coaxing the unwitting to unforeseen Heavens, Hells, and something in between. It left a tension in the bones, a restlessness in the mind that ate away sleep in the midst of night, the possibility that everything one wanted could just as easily fade from careless and foolish assumptions of fidelity while the very foundations creaked and cracked beneath every step—or that everything could just as easily be gone in the blink of an eye.

Because if it only took a fifth of a second to fall in love, it would only make sense to fall out of love just as quickly.

And these were the cancerous thoughts that weakened bonds, broke hearts, and shattered souls, smearing the grandiose name of Love to that of an extravagant illusion.

But that couldn't be. Jack knew it as only a truth. Because what he felt for the boy beside him was more real than the Tooth Fairy, Santa Clause, the Easter Bunny, and the Sandman combined. Yes, many couldn't see them—they'd lost their faith and lost their memories, their wonder, their hope, and their dreams. But Jack hadn't. Not when he was there, beside them, one of them. They were real, and he knew it. And what he felt for Hiccup—that was real too. After all, he was here, beside him, laughing at how the brunet practically collapsed on the first bus stop bench he saw, sitting right next to him as the teen shoved the books off onto the unused seat-space to make room for him, his heart leaving no room to mistake the familiar rhythm of romance as anything else.

A long and exhausted sigh painted puffs of smoky white into the winter air, eyes slipping closed as heavy fatigue washed over the high school student. Jack threw an arm over his shoulder, propping the teen upright before Hiccup melted into the seat. "You okay?"

Whether by accident or lethargy, Jack wasn't complaining when the brunet rested his head on his shoulder. "Hm? Yeah. Just a little—tired." The latter then; well, he didn't seem keen on moving any time soon, so Jack merely enjoyed the small moment, a pleasant warmth shooting down his spine.

"So, how'd it go?" he goaded, a smile in his voice.

Hiccup made a sleepy noise, generously peppered with annoyance at his rest's disruption. "Okay, I guess. Haven't really made any new friends, but I got to talk to some people."

Jack patted his shoulder encouragingly. "Well, hey! That's a start!"

The chuckle that left his lips didn't seem all too excited. In fact, it sounded hollow. "Yeah. I don't have as much catching up to do as I

thought, too. But the school's behind schedule so they're packing in everything at once before the spring term starts. Which means _finals_." Though the teen made a face, it was at least comforting to the Guardian that it was more of the school work aspect that was bothering Hiccup.

Jack gave him a sheepish grin, voicing a none-too-convincing apology. "â€|Oops?"

He shrugged. "Nah, it's your job." And much too soon for the Frost Spirit's liking, Hiccup broke away from his hold and leaned back against his seat, frowning. "And unfortunately, it's _my_ job to get all this done," gesturing to the books for emphasis. "At least I don't have all these classes at onceâ€|some of the books are for next term."

The heavy chemistry book adjacent to Jack seemed to glare at him. He picked it up and flipped through the pages with distaste. "Tough world out there, huh?" He closed the book and placed it back on the pile, the images of ions and molecules glowering from its perch. Jack stretched and leaned back as well, a parallel to the brunet as he regarded him with a small grin. "At least I don't need to go out and hunt anyone downâ€|do I?"

Hiccup laughed, this one satisfyingly more believable than the last. "As of yet, no." His eyes slipped shut from either focusing on a memory or closing himself off from everything but Jack's voice. "Most of them were too busy whining about how the break ended too early to really notice the new kid."

Jack tried to quell a niggling voice in his head that threatened to spout some nonsense about how Hiccup's current social status was decidedly a good thing for the Winter Guardian. "Oh, well that's good. I think," he replied awkwardly. Because honestlyâ€|when Hiccup made his own friends, it wasn't like Jack was going to get _jealous_ or anything like thatâ€|

The brunet hummed in seeming agreement, a soft exhale following shortly to expel the lingering stress. It was much colder now than it had been in the early afternoon and Hiccup was rather sure the Winter Spirit beside him had something to do with it. He idly wondered what caught Jack's attention that led to his inattentiveness to his seasonal duty. "So, what was it that you were trying to tell me earlier?"

At that, Jack lit up. "Ah, right!" His fingers delved into his pocket, relieved to have his searching fingers grasp the silken material. "I got something for ya!"

It was honestly surprising how suddenly revitalized Hiccup was, especially with that familiar shade of red dusting his cheeks. "J-Jack if it has something to do with the bear, you reallyâ€|"

Jack waved the words away like stray snowflakes. "Close your eyesâ€|" he insisted.

"I mean, Iâ€|" Hiccup must've heard wrong. He backtracked and stared at the figure before him. "_What?_"

The Frost Spirit snickered. "Close your eyes!"

"Youâ€|" His eyes narrowed in suspicion before drooping in weariness. "You're serious, aren't you?" Even then, he felt his face heat up, tingling with embarrassment and a bit of incredulity; it wasn't often that he received giftsâ€|and from a Guardian, no lessâ€|

(From someone like _Jack,_ no lessâ€|)

"Dead serious," he persisted with a light tone.

Green eyes narrowed in mock suspicion, a discreet smile on his lips. "This isn't a joke, is it?" At the Guardian's indignant sputter, Hiccup laughed, deciding that this wouldn't be the first time he had to take a leap of faith. Besides, although he was curious of Winter's gift, that didn't mean he'd bite so easily in the first place. But for now, he'd play along. "All right, fine. I believe you and if it'll make you happy, I guess I'll do it."

"That's all I ask," Jack evenly replied.

His eyes slipped shut as Jack retrieved the scarf, once more marveling at its beautiful design (courtesy of him, of course), trails of frost embedded against the fine fabric, waves of icy tendrils glimmering and enveloping the white expanse. In retrospect, it was kind of girly giving this to a boyâ€|but Hiccup didn't seem like the type of guy to mind. Plus, even Jack had to admitâ€|the scarf was stunning. He leaned towards the teen, not at all appreciating how his heart began racing and his stomach started doing flipsâ€|and a few other organs preparing for the Olympics.

Jack was careful, if not a little unsteady, at draping the scarf on Hiccup's shoulders. He didn't want the teen to panic and think he was strangling him or something. The material pressed close to Hiccup's neck, lying gently on his skin which pinked from the contact as Jack gingerly tied the accessory. The Ice Spirit tried not to jump at how the brunet gasped and reddened from each time his cold fingers seemed to tease over the other's skin and the minimizing proximity between them. Jack didn't say that Hiccup couldn't talk, but for now, this silence suited the strange situation. If not, Jack would probably do something really stupid as he concentrated on ignoring that incredibly and horribly foolish voice in the Frost Spirit's thoughts that threatened to take control and sever the strings of Fate, to throw his soul to Chance, and to surrender to Romance's whims by taking this opportune moment to lean in to those chapped lips and press his mouth against the teen's, stealing a kiss.

(And hopefully his heart as well.)

But he wouldn't. And he knew why too.

He pulled away, chastising the grumbling voice in his head, a pleased smile masking some very rampant emotions thrashing in his thoughts. "Ta-da!"

When Hiccup chanced a peek at what the Ice Spirit had wrapped around his neck, he was preparing a rather shaky retortâ€|but looking at it nowâ€|"Wowâ€|Jack this isâ€|" He swallowed thickly; well, _this_ definitely trumped his cheap bear. "You didn't have to. I meanâ€|" It was gorgeous and looked expensive, and _wow_ those patterns were absolutely dazzling as they almost seemed to glow against the dimming

daylight, fitting Jack and his rendition of winter perfectly and dear God, it did not sit well with Hiccup at all, receiving such an extravagant gift.

The Ice Spirit shrugged, once again glad Hiccup couldn't see his bright red face. "It's your first day in class. I figured you'd need a pick-me-up."

"So, it has nothing to do with the bear?" he reaffirmed, feeling just a bit better.

However, Hiccup felt exceedingly less so as Jack fished out the bear and playfully cuddled the little thing. The brunet nearly groaned; did Jack make it a point to lord over that embarrassing incident for as long as they lived? He shook the thought from his head. Whatever. As long as Jack was happy with it, he guessedâ€|

The Guardian regarded the bear fondly, not entirely unwitting to Hiccup's inner conflict with the plush toy. "Well, to be honest, I did want to get you something after you got me the bearâ€|"

"But you didn't have to. I-I mean don't get me wrongâ€|the scarf isâ€|really niceâ€|" Hiccup turned red when he babbled; he knew that much. But something in the back of his mind told him that Jack wouldn't listen to the long string of words otherwise unless something colorful added to the sentence to hold his attention. "And I-uh appreciate it, but youâ€|"

Unfortunately for Hiccup, Jack wasn't really interested in whatever qualms he had, regardless of the pretty blush on the brunet's cheeks. "I wanted to give you something either way. Plus, it looks nice on you." Take it as you will, but seeing the teen wearing the gift made for a nice touch, the tiny embers of possessiveness fanned by how lovely Hiccup looked in his colors, a perpetual embrace of winter hung on his shoulders, glimmering flakes of frost and ice kissing his collarbone, brushing against the nape of his neck, grazing the skin beneath his jawâ€|

The effect was profoundâ€|and just a bit startling at how delighted it made Jack to see Hiccup just as entranced with it as he had been, how gentle fingers trailed across the silken strands of white and blue, how there seemed to be this quiet awe in those green eyes that told Jack there was something more to it than just admiring a delicate piece of cloth. There was something secretive in those irises that glowed with tender warmth; the pink in his cheeks and the shy smile bitten back to hide it completely gave him away. It made Jack's heart lurch, a quickened tempo following suit as the Ice Spirit fell just a bit harder for the teen at witnessing the newfound bashfulness, different from all the times before with a sweetness that made his insides flutter, and knowing that there was now a definite possibility that his affections could be returned.

"I-Iâ€|thanksâ€|" It was a soft smile, conceding and quiet, yet expressing all that was left unsaid.

It took much of Jack's self-control not to repeat those three simple words out loud. He was glad Hiccup couldn't see the goofy smile on his face; it was embarrassing, but just hearing the words inside his own head made Jack's heart rate and blood pressure skyrocket with

tiny bursts of joy. He'd do anything to protect this happiness because this one person has made him happier than he had ever been in three hundred years. And if that meant waiting a while for Hiccup to fall in love with him too, then that was perfectly all right with Jack.

So instead he beamed, holding onto that bursting emotion for just a bit longer. "No problem! Besides, it was kind of a gift for both of us."

The brunet blinked. "Huh, what do you mean?"

"Oh, nothing~" The Winter Spirit brushed the subject aside, eyeing Hiccup's educational burden. "So, you want help carrying those books?"

Unsurprisingly, the teen rolled his eyes. "Yes and don't change the subject like that."

Jack ignored him, already trying to formulate another detour in their conversation. After all, how would Hiccup react if he knew that the Deity of Love gave Jack that scarf specifically to give to him? And he knew exactly what would do the trick. "Yannoâ€¦I was thinking of naming this little guy." He toyed with the bear, watching from the corner of his eye for Hiccup's reaction.

He wasn't disappointed. "I said donâ€¦_what_?"

A laugh rang from the Guardian of Winter as Hiccup looked partially bewildered and wholly mortified as Jack brought up the subject of the bear once more. "Yeah. It's a cute little thing. Deserves a name, don't ya think?" He made the stuffed animal wave a furry arm to Hiccup, grinning as the brunet groaned.

"Iâ€¦it's your bear. If you wanted to, I guess that's your choice," he murmured, suddenly finding the cover of an English book very interesting. He ignored the fact that his face was heating up again of course. It was just getting warm. With the scarf and all.

"Jokul," Jack announced proudly.

At that, Hiccup gave a staggered laugh. "What?" That was pretty unexpected. Hiccup frowned. "And it's _JÃ¶kul,_ " the teen corrected. "Why would you want to name it that?"

"Whatever." Jack dismissed the pronunciation with a scoff. It was his bear, wasn't it? "And it'sâ€¦so that you'll always know the difference between us." That was a good reason, wasn't it? Jack thought so.

There was a nervous chuckle, unknowing of what to say like fingers hovering over the instrument's keys as the song's score went blank. Slowly after the deafening pause, Hiccup started again, finding an unsteady rhythm. "I already know the difference," he admitted and Jack felt his heart stop. When Hiccup's eyes found his, the softest of heartbeats fractured the flatline. "_JÃ¶kul_"'s the myth who paints the leaves in autumn, freezes unpleasant people to death, the Norse counterpart of Old Man Winter. He makes winter beautiful and deadly, a mischievous sprite who also wants to bring happiness during this

season... And you're... Jack Frost." Hiccup vaguely gestured to him, hand raised and dropping uselessly like an impromptu finale.

Jack felt his breath stall before the words stumbled from his mouth, a messy tune. "And what's that supposed to mean? " He didn't miss how affectionate the teen's voice sounded, but there was a shaky hesitation there as well.

"It means... " Hiccup bit his lip, searching for the right words to say, a comforting logic long abandoned at the rabbit hole to this wonderland. "It means that you two are similar...and completely different at the same time."

Jack smiled, flecks of melancholy dotting his words. "You sound a bit confused there...you sure you know?"

"I'm sure," Hiccup confirmed, but even Jack knew that there was something else hidden in those shades of viridian, under lock and key from prying eyes and desperate hearts. But he was at least generous enough to reveal this: "He's a fairy tale and you're right hereâ€"there's nothing more different than that." Softly, Hiccup admitted, "You're the one I believe in...there's nothing greater in difference to me than that..."

Doubt lurked in the crevasses of his thoughts, a clinging curtain of shadows that obscured what was once so certain.

Because if that was so, why couldn't Hiccup see him?

Still, it made his heart warm and smile widely all the same, especially as he momentarily pushed the troubling thoughts aside for this: "You believe in me?"

Hiccup blinked. "Of course. Sitting right here next to me and all, I can't really deny it." And hadn't he made it clear before? Jack was something beyond what he was taught to understand and was instructed to leave behind as his childhood faded away...but here he was... "And...seeing is believing, isn't it?"

Jack chuckled, though the sound seemed hollow. It caught in the wind as something unpleasant rooted itself in the Guardian's thoughts, thorns blossoming in his hesitance and flourishing under these shadowed doubts. Because if seeing was believing, didn't that allude to the teen's own uncertainties? But he couldn't concentrate on that now. Not when just moments ago, he was sure he was so closeâ€| So he grinned to a pair of unseeing eyes, hoping his voice could make up for the lie in them. "Back in school one day and you already think you know it allâ€|"

But in reality, maybe his chances were slipping away.

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They were back at Hiccup's home once more, after a difficult and harrowing journey with the pile of books that very nearly topped the grocery incident (because unlike those burdens, it lacked a grip to hold on to). But amidst the light bickering ("Jack, really, I can handle it!" "You said you wanted help!" "Well you're kinda making it worseâ€"owww!" "Hah well that's what you getâ€"I-I mean, oops?"), there was still that vexing restiveness in the air, trailing

after him like an afterthought, an idea never expressed and cautions unheeded.

In Hiccup's room, the feeling intensified as Jack laid on his bed, feeling pretty awkward as the teen worked at his desk. _Homework, _he said. _I'll be done in just a bit,_ he said. _I'm still listening, go on_, he said. The Ice Spirit scoffed. That'd be great, really, if Hiccup didn't have the tendency to just nod and say, _uhuh_, to everything Jack told him. The Guardian pretty much got the idea he was being ignored in favor of his Algebra homework when he experimentally and blatantly asked the teen to marry him (_Hey, you know, we should get hitched. I'll spirit you away or something so you won't have to do homework ever again._) and Hiccup agreed without a second thought (_Uhuh, that sounds great Jackâ€¦)_ . By then, the Winter Spirit rolled over with an irritated sigh, startling Toothless which therefore led to the incidences of defending himself against the irate cat. He amused himself by battling the beast for a few moments but even then, he still felt a little disgruntled as Hiccup (had to) ignore him. The teen knew he hated that. What made it worse was how his dad popped by every few minutes to see if Hiccup was duly performing his academic obligations.

Jack knew it was a bit selfish but he couldn't shake off the feeling that he wasâ€¦in the way. Hiccup had his school work and he knew that he had to take it seriously since he was new here and still needed to adjust. He also knew that this was part of growing upâ€¦and he knew that was the part that bothered and scared him the most. He watched idly as Toothless settled himself at the foot of the bed, having grown bored of the unresponsive spirit even though he had been gnawing at his wrist for the past few minutes now. He curled up and gave a soft meow at Hiccup's direction as if to say, _Good night_, and laid his head down. Blue eyes flickered to the silent figure, still scribbling away as a new book was opened, the clock merrily ticking away yet another hour since he last told the Winter Spirit, _Just a bit more and I'll be done._ Well. Yes. It was selfish. But Jack barely noticed himself roll out of bed and hesitantly approach Hiccup.

He peeked over the teen's shoulder, finding his left hand tapping a pencil against a notebook scrawled in a foreign language and green eyes roving over the English print of the textbook. He cleared his throat. "So, what'cha reading over here?"

Hiccup barely blinked. "Ohâ€¦World History," he blandly replied.

Jack chuckled, relieved at finally receiving an actual reply from him. "Not a fan?"

"Nah, just tired." Hiccup rubbed the sleep from his eyes. He did feel bad and he knew that Jack felt bored and judging from the way he had been sighing and grumbling all night, undeniably _annoyed_. But this was the path Hiccup followed, what he was born into, that of _ordinary_ people. Jack helped him see the magic of life again, but even that was but a reprieveâ€¦ he couldn't forget about reality, about what was expected of him. He knew he had to grow up. _But still_â€¦ "Say, you've gone through some of this stuff, right?"

Jack gave him a hard glare. "You callin' me old?"

Hiccup laughed, the sound filling the empty room and making it even harder for Jack to stay annoyed at him. "No, I'm not. Justâ€|more knowledgeable than most on what really happened." He reclined on his chair, stretching for a bit, and turned to face Jack. "You know, my teacher said that until lions can tell their own tales, the hunter will always be the heroâ€|"* He chuckled. "Got any stories to tell?"

He didn't have to grow up today.

Hiccup smiled as Jack seemed to liven up. "Wellâ€|!" Then the Ice Spirit trailed off, the shadowy figure appearing sheepish as he continued with diffidence. "You sure that's a good idea?"

The teen shrugged. "I'd rather listen to first-hand experiences. Can't learn everything from a text book." He relaxed, a soft breath flowing from his lips as the tension was eased away. "Besides, I need a break anyways."

"Ohâ€|well in that case, yeah! Augh, geez, you wouldn't _believe_ half the stuff I saw!" He shook his head with bemusement. "Man, things just changed so much!" He chuckled softly, eyes gazing with warmth at Hiccup and at nothing at all. "And so much stayed the same tooâ€|"

He talked on from there, the night slipping away in without a second thought as history mingled with his memories, a culmination of Jack's sights and experiencesâ€|and rewriting his age-old fears of loneliness. Because there were the Guardians now, his own little chaotic and embarrassing cohort and makeshift-family, Jamie, Sophie, and the rest of the Burgess children who found faith in himâ€|and Hiccup who was there, listening to him chatter on, trying desperately to follow along with the anecdotes and the Winter Guardian's own musings at the past and his own private wonderments of the future while expressing a quiet giddiness at the sight of that scarf, still hanging on Hiccup's neck, glimmering with snowflakes and frost, despite the seventy-seven-degree temperature inside the houseâ€|and the realization that he was still holding onto JÃ¶kultoo.

It was a warm moment, and when Hiccup nudged him gently to continue when his thoughts floated away to these sentimental little miracles, there was a sudden ache within him that he could have just as easily brushed off as nostalgia. But even he knew that one day, he wouldn't be able to shake off these thoughts, shrug them away, and leave them as festering anxieties in the dead of night. It was coming, and they both knew it, and whether one of them wanted to own up to it or not, it would be there, its tremors far too devastating to ignore, a tragic summation of all their fears and inevitabilities.

It settled there, a havoc in remission, dead silent in wait of its malignant awakening.

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The Guardians were crowded around the small screen, lens focused on the window of a certain house in a small neighborhood in Burgess. They had been surveying them for a while now, vaguely watching small blurs on the camera move about in one corner of the room while a motionless splash of auburn melded with the blob of what could be a desk in the corner. It had been a long night in the Surveillance Room

of the Pole.

North craned his neck, watching both the monitor and the controls, adjusting the camera's angles and messing with the zoom. "What are they doing now?"

Once he managed to set the device properly, the windows framed the image of the Guardian and the boy, an ordinary scene, sweet in its simplicity. "Talkingâ€¦ just talkingâ€¦" Tooth reported. It was bright in the room and they could plainly see the two both laughing as Jack made wild gestures as his mouth ran.

The Sandman smiled; he could feel the tenderness in the moment between them. They weren't quite sure what was happening before, but the distress of their friend's actions was worrying. Jack wasn't prone to sitting in one place for long periods of time and was more used to being up and about. It seemed as though he was waiting for somethingâ€¦and by the looks of it, his surprising show of patience paid off.

"Heâ€¦looks happyâ€¦doesn't he?" Tooth admitted gently. "I've never seen him smile so much beforeâ€¦"

"Yesâ€¦he certainly is," North granted. "This happinessâ€¦is different from before. It isâ€¦soft happiness. Not like his usual fun, no?" It was bittersweet, but this was proof enough. Jack seemed wholly enamored with the boy.

However, Bunny's eyes weren't fixed on the sugary scene. "He's a high school studentâ€¦" he murmured. No, his eyes were on the stacks of the Advanced Placement books perched on the desk. "He's startin' to grow up alreadyâ€¦"

Tooth eyed him, bewildered. "Bunny?"

North and Sandy gave each other a look before turning to their fellow Guardian. "What do you mean?"

His eyes never left the screen, only trained at the back of this one troubling teenager. "Ya missed itâ€¦when Jack was just sittin' thereâ€¦ and the kidâ€¦he knowsâ€¦" Earlier, the others were too fixed on the clarity of the images, not what the images were actually doing. He saw itâ€¦how the brunet would look back when Jack was fooling around with another dark-colored dot on the screen, a seeming aversion to say something, do something, while he paradoxically pondered on what should be done before he buried himself under his work once more.

"Knows what?" Toothiana pressed.

"Knows he doesn't have long with 'imâ€¦" It was a hunch, but Bunny knew when to trust his gut. The signs were there. "He's not sure why, but he can feel it."

A hand stroking his beard, the Guardian of Wonder gazed at the teen, trying to find what Aster discovered. "How are you so sure?"

There was a sardonic laugh from the Guardian of Hope. "Hah. No one just takes a break and lets someone like Frost jabber on like that while he's busyâ€¦unless he was feelin' somethin' awful. Somethin'

that's comin' faster than he'd like." When their visual cleared, and all other pairs of eyes were on their friend, Bunny was again looking at the boy. There was a troubled look on his face, and Bunnymund would bet his holiday that it had more to do with Jack than it had with the subject he was trying to study. His actions weren't just relenting to Jack's interruption, but they entirely welcomed it, as though he had two clashing commitments to meet and was unwilling to let the other go.

He knew what was coming.

They all knew.

He was pulled from his thoughts as a stream of Dreamsand floated over his vision and a soft, "Bunny?" from the Guardian of Memories shattered his concentration.

He turned to them and recognized the worry on their faces. But it was a good worry, wasn't it? This was their chance; this time, Fate worked in their favorâ€|because this teenager was smart. This teenager wasn't some slacking goof, ready to throw all responsibilities out the window. Magic lives and exists, it thrives before him, and he had Jack'sâ€|the Guardian of Fun, the Harbinger of Winterâ€|he had his heart. But he was smart enough to know that he couldn't hold on to it forever. He knew it wasn't meant to last. He just couldn't abandon it all himself.

And the sooner the kid let go, the better it would be for Jack in the end.

Bunny steeled himself, readying the next plan. "This works to our advantage. The kid's smartâ€|and even he knows that there's no gettin' around growin' up, movin' forward." Fate and Chance needed to be on their side. "They just need a lil' pushâ€|" From there, even Love would have to take a bow and resign her reign.

* * *

><p>(Silly Hiccupâ€|you should've taken Jack's offer at face value.)<p>

Apparently, it can take only a fifth of a second to fall in love; science reveals this, but not entirely answering "why." Then again, there are some things that not even logic can ever fully explain.

*= "To a Mouse" â€| "The best laid schemes o' mice an' men / Gang aft agley_." The English paraphrase from the Scots poem was popularized in the famous novel Of Mice and Men by John Steinbeck.

*= The roses described by Jack are called Baby Romantica in representation of puppy love ("baby romance"? And yesâ€| they're the roses from the ending song of the same name in JunjÅ• Romanticaâ€|)

*= Cupid's full name is Valencia Nomios Tine. She rarely uses it and prefers being called by her notorious identity; letters with her name on them signify the message's importance. "Nomios" is one of Aphrodite's titles as a Greek Goddess, meaning"of the flock." So yeahâ€| "Val. N. Tine." (Because I have no real imagination when it

come to names).

Note: Bunnymund has talked about Cupid, but never mentioned that he worked with her; I imagine that the Guardians sometimes gossip over other magical beings, but Jack never really took what he heard from Bunny too seriously, so he doesn't really know about her eccentricities.

***= African_ proverb: _** "_Gnatola ma no kpon sia, eyenabe adelan to kpo mi sena." (Ewe-mina)_ "_Until the lion has his or her own storyteller, the hunter will always have the best part of the story__." (___English)_

In case if you were curious about Fortuna she won't be mentioned much (this time, _I swear_); Cupid took over her role after a past event that led to her disappearance and the transfer of Fate's power to the Goddess of Love.

****Important:**** To any of those that review (and I really do appreciate you taking the time to tell me your thoughts regarding this story, be it compliments, words of encouragement, or criticism, I am more than open to any one) I would like to request something of you: I'm taking a sort of poll. I'm not making one on my profile because I find this easier for both of us. So if you're thinking of reviewing, please include in there your choice of: "Rock," "Paper," or "Scissors." It will determine an aspect of the story.

(I'm not really sure if it's an _important_ aspect, but it's an aspect).

-falls back into hibernation-

16. Captains and Cruise Ships

I thank all of you from the bottom of my heart that read and enjoy this story. I just hope that I won't be a letdown. We're at summer's sunset and I hope to make it before dusk. Also, thanks for voting! Paper was our winner!

****Just Call Me Endy****, once again, a great, big thanks to you (and don't worry, we're almost there). Couldn't have done it without you. You're amazing.

****Warnings:** **A bit of language and a lot of metaphors.

****Disclaimer:**** I own nothing but a laptop and certain plot elements.

* * *

><p>Time remained an enigma, a faithful constant, and a cruel master, falling between the spectrums and peripheries, unique and ubiquitous all at once. It could slow its seconds, the small hands like a steady heartbeat, a tranquil thrum evoking the essence of memories, a masterpiece illustrated by time's persistence. It preserved the precious moments, savoring eras that proved profound to the growth of character, the development of the soul, and to the lessons of life.<p>

For Jack, these moments since his reawakening spanned from the first miserable years of his isolation, his induction as a Guardian, and most recently, meeting a certain freckled, green-eyed, brunet teenager and subsequently falling head over heels for him.

But time hastened its hours as well, the large hands blurring months and years from the mind to meld as dazed events that happened "a long time ago." Time skipped along the passages of one's life like skimming through the arduous details of a novel, circumventing the mind to ignore the ordinary episodes and discard foolish mistakes—mistakes that may prove symbolic and inspire change, a transformation, a _chance_.

For Jack, it was those despairing centuries before he found something to fight for and people who stood by his side, those empty years of infinite white and endless cold, large voids in his life that his thoughts would rather not visit and simply let the bitterness and solitude lie to gather dust in the farthest corners of his mind.

He lived them now as well.

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"_I can hang out in a bit. Just lemme finish this up, okay?"_

It was nothing big—so the teen couldn't hang out for while, though the snow had freshly fallen and the melody of children's laughter rang in the air, catching the winter breeze with their shrieks and giggles and the rush of _fun_ that sang along to a voiceless tune.

Jack turned his gaze to unseen stars but instead caught sight of something a few ways closer than that, smile dimming as he spotted Hiccup's silhouette from his home's window, no doubt scribbling away through equations and terms, analyzing passages, and drawing up diagrams for tomorrow with weary sighs fluttering from his parted lips and a wrinkle of bored concentration on his brow—even as Jack stood in the streets, lost in the strange silence that deafened him to Sophie's squeals, Jamie's yells, Pippa's giggles, Cupcake's roars, the commotions of Caleb and Claude, and Monty's cries for help upon an unseen assault—none could draw the teen away from his work.

It was a pretty afternoon, with sunbeams dancing off of the contours of clouds like slivers of hope clinging to promises that even Jack wasn't blind enough to believe.

.

"_Sorry Jack, not today—it's been kinda rough with our regular teacher out sick—maybe tomorrow?"_

It seemed odd now, a strange ache in his chest at the emptiness that now presided there, Winter's eyes beholding an explosion of stars against the velvet of night, instead of the miniature constellations on Hiccup's skin from the dim bedroom lights.

It was a strange feeling, almost absurd; he hadn't slept in a bed for centuries, but a few days in the comfort of Hiccup's room—no—he knew it wasn't the soft duvet or the firm mattress or even the warm

blanket the teen would pull from the Ice Spirit's grasp in the middle of the night and cocoon himself with when his bedmate unwittingly caused the temperature to plummet that made this odd hurt blossom in his chest.

No, this ache was borne from something else. Definitely not from the innocent request that Jack busy himself for a few hours while Hiccup immersed himself in his responsibilities, definitely not from the blatantly apologetic, yet utterly imploring look on Hiccup's face to please, please, please don't take this the wrong way, and definitely not from the way Jack's heart gave a sudden lurch at being recognized as a distraction.

No, it was that Hiccup still wanted him aroundâ€|but Jack knew that right now (and he reminded himself time and time again that it was just for right now), Hiccup needed his time, needed his space, and if that meant that Jack would reacquaint himself his old friend loneliness then that'd be all right.

It wouldn't be every night.

He'd have his time with the brunet, to be able to tease him, to laugh with him, to hold his hand like they did some time ago, and to hold him innocently during the night, and perhaps even a chance to let slip those three very important words that before used to cycle in nauseating repeats, and now only dully echoed when Jack soothed the faint pain away, feeling his heart thud soundly in his chest.

It won't be every night, he reminded his heart more than he reminded himself.

It was a silent wish, and though Jack long ceased wishing on stars, the glittering gems in the darkness coaxed him to pleading with an unspecified amount of desperation Please don't let it beâ€|

.

"I can'tâ€|got a test coming up. How about this weekend?"

The days carried on, as effortlessly as the seasons come and go, a work of nature, a design of fate, a perpetual revolution of birth, bloom, decay, and death.

The final and first season of the year, brought forth by the hands of Ice and Frost, an embodiment of beauty and demise, and the epitome of hardships and fun colliding in whirls and flurries of white. The perpetual emptiness of winter, the color of dormant possibilities, the fluttering cut of silk left dangling from the back of a chair in Hiccup's room, forgotten and abandoned one sunny, winter day.

It was the Death Months and how Jack loathed letting others forget.

The skies hung heavy and dark, a tension in the air like unshed tears bit back in a naïve show of courage, a thin veil of denial curtained over wretched shades of grief. Layers of frost and ice blanketed the barren earth, a bit too late in the season some may say, a bit too strong for this weather others respond, and others don't say anything at all as the children flood the streets, an ephemeral warmth passing over the Guardian's thoughts as he delivered his gift

and made sure, _absolutely sure_ that Winter came through for them with a snow day, no matter how grey the clouds and no matter how brief his storm, no matter how heavy his heart.

He had time and right now, it seemed as though time was all he had. Burgess had already been blessed _plenty_ by his visits so right now, he tended to the neighboring cities within the state, not because he felt obligated to stay nearby but because he didn't want to be too far away.

It wasn't so hard to explain why, because although his time with a certain teenager had dwindled to a few hours a day at a time, those dear _ticks_ and _tocks_ were precious to him and some days, he didn't care how somewhat pathetic it was.

(But most days, he questioned his very sanity, but concluded that sometimes, being in this horrible state called, "_in_ _love_" heeded not to sanity, nor logic. It was a sad and bitter truth, but through a good number of those realizations, Jack would pull through all right.)

It was because he was a Spirit of Winter, a fragment of an enduring cycle that would outlive the rise and falls of empires, the conflicts and strife of humanity, and Jack knew that he possessed time in abundance. But his time with the teen was _not_ so, and as such, every encounter, every smile, every chuckle, every time he said hello and goodbye to the teen was specialâ€|because the time when it would all end was rounding some future corner and Jack would be _damned_ if he let Hiccup forget who he was.

Winter was a vain month, encasing everything it could lay its hands on with the mark of his possession and of his presence.

And how Jack loathed letting others forget.

(Or so he tried telling himself when the _one_ that mattered seemed to have already.)

.

"_My week's pretty packed right nowâ€|and I have a project coming up with a few of my classmatesâ€|"_

He mentioned a few names, sparse descriptions, and recounted some unenthused events, unimpressively surmounting to nothing but yet another subject to brush on during one of their walks. That, at least, had not changed.

But many things had.

It had become like an arid atmosphere after the height of seasonal rains, or a sudden halt in a sentence without the trails of dots, like fading footprints, to present an erasing thought. Hiccup still looked at him as though Jack was the only one in his world, but all too often and all too soon, when there were others around, there came this revelation to him that to _others_, Jack wasn't there at all, and he slowly went mute to the Ice Spirit and only spared soft murmurs to the still air beside him, and his fond gazes when they conversed dissipated to quick glances in the shadow's direction.

But he spared short remarks to those that greeted him, a smile and wave to those whose attention he caught, and slowly, Jack faded to a backdrop of white and all the teen had to offer him was a slight nod and the teeniest flicker of an apology in those eyes of Summer's End.

If Winter was vain, it may be jealous as well, because even Jack couldn't deny the flames he swallowed as another boy clapped Hiccup's back and drew him close in a friendly one-armed embrace, his face friendly and kind while his boy, yes, his boy withdrew from the contact with a nervous laugh, holding himself close like a February storm had just rattled his bones.

The next morning, he had to explain to Hiccup that someone making the teen uncomfortable counted as "bullying" to this Winter Guardian, justifying his rather creative use of snow and hail on the unsuspecting "bully." But even then, the satisfaction was short-lived as it was wont to be, a taunting drizzle in the midst of a drought, as Hiccup rolled his eyes and refused to let the subject drop for the remainder of the walk.

In the end, he knew and understood that he wasn't the only one in Hiccup's world, just as Hiccup wasn't the only one in Jack's. The real difference, however, was that even if Hiccup wereâ€|Jack found that at times, he wouldn't mind it one bit.

Because that's how fantasies worked, right? Where every little thing came along nicely without need for trouble or doubt and the heart rejoiced at this astute perfection it inventedâ€"never mind the flaws, the holes that needed to be covered, and the selfish wishes beneath the gilded exterior, like the bars of a cage holding a fluttering bird that was too anxious and tense to open its beak and sing a song, the air constricting and pinning its wings against the cold metal of possessiveness. And it was sometimes wrong, so, so, so very wrong, but the heart couldn't help but want, delude, and deceive the mind to feast from these noxious schemes.

Because anyone who believed in love knew all too well that envy and jealous y could be frequent visitors to those who had been afflicted with the possibility of losing everything on a single whim, a small choice, a despairing truth.

.

"Jack, I'm really sorry, but you gotta understandâ€|"

And the fact of it was that yes, Jack did understand.

He understood that growing up meant spending more time on work than on fun. That growing up meant that things had to wait, things were forgotten, and that other things had this poisonous and unfair attribute called priority.

He understood that in the grand scheme of things, perhaps an unspoken and maybe even unrequited love ranked beneath the tidbits that would aid Hiccup in the future, guiding him as he grew up to be a responsible man, and not just the wonderful teen he knew, the wonderful teen whose time for him seemed to grow fainter and fainter and yet his presence persisted in the Guardian's thoughts.

He understood it was necessary.

He understood that maybe it was time.

He understood that he knew he couldn't do a thing about it.

He understood that even if it was hopeless to wait, he would.

Because above all, he wanted Hiccup to see him, right? He wanted to see those brilliant viridian eyes widen with shock and awe, to feel the bursting happiness thrumming through his veins, heartbeat mirroring that of the teen's blissful cadence, to hear those words that he needed from Hiccup: I can finally see you. I believe in you. I love you. It didn't matter what order, what variation, or if one took longer than the other.

So, as foolish as it was, he would wait, he would wait because even if his hope crumbled to dust this was all he could cling to, he would wait because he didn't have it in him to simply fall out of love, he would wait because it was the only thing he knew. For three hundred years, he had waited to be seen, to be believed in, to fall in love. And all three were worth the agony, the despair, the misery, and the lonelinessâ€|because it made all of those things all the more precious.

And unless something short of a miracle would occur, another "divine intervention" by the hands of Fate, Chance, or Love, he would endure through this, because waiting was all he could do. In the grand scheme of things, Jack understood.

(But in the grand scheme of things, perhaps it wasn't as bad as it seemed, that happiness thrived even in the most desolate of times, slices of intervals where Jack's world was composed of nothing more than the brunet's crooked smiles, his sharp wit, and playful sarcasm, and of course that horrible, rising yearning for the unwitting teenager who everyday seemed to drift just a bit farther from Winter's grasp, but somehow managed to find his way back each day through the help of little routines that remained unbroken, seldom and sometimes unspoken promises met and so what if things were changing?â€|life is change and time is the only constant.)

But delusions were sharp and powerful shards of time, often tainted by the thoughts that plague happiness and the heartaches that began to question Love, prominent in garish palettes of hurt and bitterness. And in the mind's eye, nothing else existed but the pieces that produced pain and drew tears.

.

Jack had long gotten used to the sight of Hiccup collapsing onto his bed after he walked him back from school, backpack in tow only serving to crush the teen further into the mattress.

"I think I finally get the phrase, 'T.G.I.F.'" came the muffled confession.

"Heh, I'm sure you'll be having that sentiment for years to come," Jack assured, plopping down beside him and assisting the lethargic teen in surrendering his academic burden while Hiccup grunted in

thanks. He unceremoniously dropped the pack to the floor, a slight smugness in seeing the object of his ire in a defeated slump. Some daysâ€|it wasn't so bad. Like today, nothing had really warranted the Frost Spirit's despondency or irritation, particularly because Hiccup hadn't mentioned any plans this weekend. No projects, no tests, no essays, nothing aside from the usual homeworkâ€|nothing at all. '_Maybeâ€|I should give asking him out another shotâ€|' _At that thought, there was a not-so-nonchalant cough before Jack innocuously started, "Been a pretty busy couple of weeks, huh?"

Hiccup rolled over onto his back, nearly choking when his scarf caught on his arm. "Definitelyâ€|" He sighed and cast his gaze on Jack's shadowed face. "I just hope by the spring term, everything'll go more smoothly." As his eyes slipped shut for a moment's rest, Jack lowered his head, eyes trained at the nonsensical patterns on Hiccup's sheets.

"Rightâ€|_spring_â€|" Jack had forgotten again; it kept slipping from his mind like sand in a sieve as he fruitlessly pursued precious time with the teen. But no, even the thought didn't sound right in his head. He wasn't forgetting at all; the grains of passing days, hours, and weeks fell in neat and growing piles while Jack watched with blind apathy, vacant regret.

Upon opening his eyes, Hiccup frowned. After weeks spent with the Winter Guardian's near-perpetual presence, Hiccup took small pride in guessing how Jack was feeling without seeing the expression on his face. It wasn't too difficult since the brash spirit seemed to be the type to wear his heart on his sleeveâ€|but that wasn't entirely so. To be sure, Hiccup looked for signs: body language, his tone, his wordsâ€|and lately, they all conveyed something that had been building up over time, a resounding melancholy that gripped the Guardian in its massive and unforgiving maw. Still, Jack never said a thing; the teen never took him for a silent, martyr type, but it was obvious Jack wasn't too keen in sharing his distress with others. And that was the problem. All Hiccup could do was sit up, clear his throat, and at least show the guy he cared. "Hey, uhâ€|you okay Jack?"

He could see the Guardian face him, broken from his daze with yet another practiced response on his lips. "Hm? I'm fine."

'_Liar,'_ the brunet bit back. Instead, a half-hearted, "Well, if you're sure," tumbled from his mouth, feeling a bit helpless as Jack lapsed into silence once more.

Hiccup had more or less of an idea as to what had been bothering Jack, but he knew better than to confront him about it, especially since he had been rather moody after the teen's first few days in school. And Hiccup knew that was the root of the problem, but he had a feeling that Jack would rather go melt out in the Sahara than admit that he missed spending time with himâ€|even if Hiccup could admit that he felt the same way. Though the days spent with Jack dwindled to mere hours a day, it was still enough (or so Hiccup tried to tell himself when the Guardian disappeared into the night without another word and only returned by daylight, leaving something like voiceless longing suffocating the confused teen's thoughts as he lay awake in a too-warm bed in his too-quiet bedroom well into the late hours). But understandably, things weren't the same. He missed the jokes, the jabs, the laughs, their bickering, their talksâ€|the familiar air of

Winter that emanated from the shadow, how he could feel the warmth of his touch just below the initial cool of his skin, how Jack could never get Jāṅkul's name right, and how childishly happy he got whenever Hiccup wore his scarf. And he loathed to admit it, but he was even starting to miss the grating way Jack saidâ€|_certain things_ just to gauge the right (_blushing, stuttering, mortifying, warm, tender, wonderful, perfect_) reaction from him. These things were still thereâ€|

But just not as often as Hiccup would likeâ€|as much as Hiccup would love.

And it was that exact feeling that led him to this proposition now: "Hey, I know we haven't really been hanging out like we used toâ€"

The Guardian scoffed. "Well isn't _that_ a bit of an understatement?" Upon hearing those words and registering them in his head a second after, Jack winced; he hadn't planned on that response to come out soâ€|harsh.

Hiccup shifted his gaze away, muttering, "No need to get testy."

Well damn. This wasn't going well. He was supposed to be making up for lost time, wasn't he? So just like always, Jack had to turn it into a joke; Hiccup had long gotten used to this routine anyways. "I'm not being testy," he defended, all smiles in his voice. "Just like that time you _weren't_ throwing a hissy fit because of that little accidentâ€"

"Just because my math teacher's probably never heard 'An Ice Spirit froze my Algebra homework' as an excuse doesn't mean she'll believe me, Jack," Hiccup replied with a deadpan stare. Did he really miss this?

(Yes, unfortunately, he did.)

The Frost Spirit shrugged. "_I_ thought it was worth a shot." Hiccup could huff and puff all he wanted; Jack saw that smile and the Winter Spirit felt the upwards tug at the corners of his own mouth at the warm sight. And just like that, the frustration ebbed away, leaving curiosity in its wake. "So, what were you saying earlier?"

"O-ohâ€|that." It was one of those lessons that Hiccup had to learn: although he was quite good at working with spontaneity and on-the-spot planningâ€|that didn't always mean that he'd achieve success at impromptu proposals. "I was just wondering if youâ€|ahâ€|"

Jack was grinning widely by now, mood significantly brightened by the display. "Aw, I almost forgot how red you got when you're nervous."

The brunet scowled, ignoring the blood rushing to his face. "Shut it."

There was a snicker and Hiccup could grudgingly admit that at least he made the jerk feel better. "Well? Carry on," Jack goaded with a

flick of his wrist.

He took in a sharp breath, knowing that he'd need some of the cool air to calm down and convey his message clearly. Too bad his words came out like blustering winds instead. "Got any plan tonight?"

Jack barked out a laugh, bewildered, but happy. Ah—Hiccup seemed to be in one of his "cuter" moods today (and while Jack was fully aware that if Hiccup ever heard him dub his embarrassing reactions as such, he'd be dealing with the silent treatment for a week, he really didn't care at this point). Well now; looks like the tables had turned with asking the brunet out. But Jack would inquire once more—just to make sure. "What was that?"

If possible, the angry blush grew even more vibrant against the teen's skin. "_I said_—"

Yeah, Jack didn't mind the consequences in saying this either: "Aw, are you asking me out on a _date_?" Jack ignored that deliriously happy part of him that pleaded, '_Please say yes._'

This time, it was Hiccup's turn to scoff, glare positively scathing in Jack's direction. "You interested or not, Frosty?"

"I guess you could say I am," Jack teased, though he knew himself '_Now _that_ was definitely an understatement_.' "What do you have in mind?"

The irritation seemed to dissipate, although it was mostly through Hiccup's own silent sighs of relief that Jack agreed and decided not to question his intent. "Remember that lake you took me to?" After all, Hiccup had actually been planning this (with some help) for some time now, and today seemed as good a time as ever to see if he was right. "The day after we first err—met," the teen elaborated as he casually looked off to the side, hoping that the action didn't appear too nervous or anxious, even as his hands twisted the sheets in his grip.

Jack reddened, remembering that excursion _very _well_. "Mhm?" It was, after all, the first time he gave his undivided attention to that annoying and troubling emotion he felt towards Hiccup.

The teen opened his mouth to speak, but only silence entered the still bedroom air. His brain berated him for hesitating, but another part of his mind wandered back to that day. Something changed, something possibly more significant than his outlook on life and his beliefs and what he thought was _truth_ and the extent of his reality. Something between _them_. It wasn't an unpleasant change—no, it was far from it, but Hiccup was sure that whatever this change was—it'd reveal itself and its name to him if he went back there with Jack. And maybe Hiccup had the faintest of hints, a whispered response from quivering winds, a fading wisp's light to guide him through this strange enigma—and maybe it all started with the fact that it wasn't really a _change_ that happened that day—but more of a _beginning_.

Hiccup sighed and just hoped that Jamie was right about this because if curiosity killed the cat (or downed the dragon), then satisfaction better as hell bring it back. "It seems like a pretty nice place to go ice-skating, don't you think?"

It wasn't quite so much as a shock as it was a bolt of lightning. "Ice-skating? Why do you ask?" After a second, Jack frowned, questioning a little more hesitantly than he'd like, "And you sure that's a good idea?" It wasn't as though he feared some dreadful misfortune that could take place and hurt Hiccup (because there's absolutely no way he'd ever let that happen) but he'd have to stick by Hiccup's side the whole time, keep him close in case of any weakness in the ice, and the whole going ice-skating in itself, something he loved to do before he became a Guardian with his beloved sister at that frozen slab of water, it seemed kind of strange that the only person who ever knew that

Somehow Jack got the feeling this request had Jamie Bennett written all over it.

"No clue, really," Hiccup replied; the teen didn't need to see Jack to know he was shooting him a skeptical look. "And no, not at all. I'm pretty terrible at it," the brunet confessed with a laugh.

"Then why?" the Frost Spirit pressed.

"Why not?" the teen countered.

"A valid argument," Jack drawled.

His smirk was a bit too smug for Jack's liking. "Thank you." The sheepish laughter that followed was much more pleasant to the Guardian. "And also because, once again, I'm god-awful at it"ever since I was a kid in Berk; and well, I've always wanted to get better." The Winter Spirit watched with mild curiosity as Hiccup looked off into empty space and cringed at some private thoughts. "Yeah, you know for some reason, ice has never treated my behind kindly" and as the words left his lips, his eyes widened and that pretty blush was back before he pointedly added, "By falling! Falling on I mean." The teen coughed, rather relieved that he didn't have to suffer through Jack's looks of blatant amusement since he couldn't see him. So, he continued on. "So since you're the embodiment of ice and winter, I thought 'Why not?' " That was a rather elaborate front Hiccup ingeniously applied, no matter how true the childhood experience bit was. Too bad Jack wasn't buying it. Hiccup sighed as he, once again, acquainted himself with Jack's unrelenting doubt. "But seriously, is that okay with you? Or do you wanna do something else other than"

"Nah, it sounds good to me!" He let out a careless laugh, though he discreetly eyed the wave of relief that washed over Hiccup's eyes. Interesting. Jack would just have to see what the teen was up to. Besides, he missed Hiccup. And maybe tonight, he'd get the opportunity to tell him that properly via the usual teasing and sappy nonsense that just spewed from his mouth whenever he was talking with the brunet. And plus, having the open opportunity to teach Hiccup proper balance on the ice (which does require a lot of holding and handling and Jack couldn't find it in him to object at all to that) and rescuing the brunet before he suffered more bruises than necessary from the frozen floor made him look forward to it already. So he reassured his friend, "Not to worry"I'm an excellent instructor and I'll be sure to watch your butt." Yes, he was aware of what he had just said and the look Hiccup was giving.

Seeing as his glare did nothing to disquiet the amused Winter Spirit, the teen rolled his eyes. "_That's_ comforting."

Jack chuckled and wondered if Hiccup could instead hear his heart hammering against his chest since he couldn't see the bright smile on his face. "So, it's a date?" Because Jack knew Hiccup was doing this for them and something like happiness lit up inside him, little shooting stars gifting him golden chances to catch in his hold while the time's grains fell from his grasp.

Hiccup sighed, unwinding the scarf from his neck, hoping the act would hide the pink tingeing his cheeks. "If you insist on using that word, then sure. It's a date."

.

Love was under siege.

Yet as right as Aster's assumptions were, as sound as the plan was, and as weak as Cupid's hold on the Guardian of Winter had become, something didn't feel right._

And maybe it was because seeing the growing despair in their friend's eyes ate at his conscience, maybe it was because seeing the boy and being with him made their friend undoubtedly happy, so much so that it tore at his heart, maybe it was because they seemed to be hurting their friend more than helping him, and maybe it was because Aster wasn't the only one keeping an eye on the teenager—the teen whose thoughts often floated from the classroom to the snow collecting at the windowsill, who glowed with a subtle joy around their friend and whose light dimmed all too soon when he left, who was a good kid and deserved to smile more often because Sandy only ever saw a real smile grace his lips when the Winter Spirit was around, and though he never said anything out loud, he didn't need to because his actions spoke volumes of love for their friend, more than what mere words could convey, and that was something the Sandman rather liked about this teenager.

Which was why he had no doubt in his mind that he was about to feel very guilty.

Cupid may have been interfering less and less due to the mounting distance between Jack and this other boy, but Sandy knew that he had to take precautions. His comrades gave it their all given their conditions and restrictions owing to Cupid's resilient grasp, but it was his turn now and with the Deity of Love's current state, it had to be tonight that the Guardians finally took their victory. As the Easter Bunny said, it was time they put a stop to this pitiful war with Love.

He overheard the plans for that afternoon; that Jack would go on ahead and "prep" the lake for their "date" while the brunet finished up the rest of his homework so he could be free without worry for the weekend. The teen wanted to argue, wanting to go with Jack as soon as possible to their destination, but, much to the Sandman's relief and paradoxical remorse, Jack adamantly refused to let him. Jack wanted all of the boy's attention and so he needed to get the little things out of the way. And with a red face and much sputtering, the boy relented.

It would only take an hour at best for them to meet.

And an hour was more than enough time for Sandy.

It was with honed concentration and a heavy heart that Sandy ascended into the monochrome skies, golden snares of destructive illusions snaking across cold reality, a cruel contrast, unseen by the Spirit of Winter as he flew from the teen's open window and towards his own reveries, his ecstatic cry echoing in Sandy's thoughts and the thinnest trickles of regret seeped into the Guardian of Dreams' veins. There was only the slightest pause before instinct finalized his resolve.

It didn't feel right.

For the teen working hastily on his desk, his steady hand began to waver, his vision blurring as an inexplicable yawn clawed its way from his throat while a dull weight smothered his thoughts. The words on the page began to melt together; a sudden and overwhelming fatigue wracked his body as the pencil he held slipped from his grasp; his eyes fought to remain open, something in his conscious demanding him to regain focus while his body slowly surrendered to the menacing weariness. He had to stay awake. He had to. Jack was waiting for him. He needed to be there. He needed to go. He needed to leave. He needed to see Jack. He needed to tell him something. He needed to tell him somethingâ€¦ needed to go somewhereâ€¦ needed to meet someoneâ€¦ needed to do somethingâ€¦ someone was waitingâ€¦

_Something was
wrong._

Heâ€¦

Neededâ€¦

Toâ€¦

Stayâ€¦

Awake

.

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It was the last of what he saw before his lids fluttered closed, a soothing darkness lulling him to a sinister hold: a glimpse of gold, a gilded little fantasy that danced before his eyes like a wingless flock of birds shrouding his senses and emptying his mind. Tiny dreams and hopeless thoughts flecked with pretty, glittering lies were caged soundly in his thoughts, the key turning the tumbles in the lock with resonating clicks as the shimmering grains squirmed and trembled aimlessly to form vivid nonsense and sweet snares to dement his dreams.

The key to the waking world was stolen away and Hiccup found himself trapped between a fantasy and a Guardian's remorseful masterpiece.

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It was with great vivacity that Winter swept through the glade, a chilling bliss that resonated deeply through the wooded area as a brightness settled across the spirit's heart. Icy gales and freshly fallen snow decorated the scenery, little wonders of the beautiful season draped the naked trees and the colorless skies, as small giddy bursts of joy erupted from its Harbinger. It was a brisk sensation as the Guardian perfected the scene, touches of ice and frost akin to ornate embellishments skating across the frozen lake, uncaring of how the pretty little formations curled its tendrils to that of intertwined hearts because this was a good day and Jack didn't care if it seemed like he was setting the atmosphere for something other than just a friendly excursion because maybe, just maybe, he wouldn't have to hold his breath, maybe it was more than just an outing, maybe he wouldn't have to wait any longer, and maybe it was because he still held on to that small spider-silk strand of hope that Hiccup felt the same way.

It was still wishful thinking, and so what if the stars he confided in were light-years away, long dead before he relayed his one cherished wish, because as he counted every flickering dot of radiance, he knew that although supernovas may have torn their light, what was left in their wake gave way to birth new beginnings, endless possibilities, and an infinite hope while he just wondered at questions asked and answers never given. But there was a deep contentment underneath it all because there was a sort of magic in it, right?

He was in love. Out of three hundred years and the billions and billions of humans, spirits, legends, fables, and fairytales—he was in love with this one person.

It's him.

It's him.

It's him.

A heart's devotion is a tricky thing. It's prone to its whims and its misgivings, its errors and its blindness—but it was a stubborn little thing that ached with every beat, craving both attention and caution because it was a fragile thing as well, bruising like supple flesh unprepared for all that life had to inflict. It caved too early, it caved too late, it festered with poison and healed with affectionate remedies. It flipped and flopped as time ticked and tocked, so sure of itself one moment and at an utter loss the next.

And as an hour passed, and then another, and then another, and then another, Jack did think about going after Hiccup, to find where he was and tell him that the lake was ready and so they could be off on their merry way and towards that little path to happily ever after, but no, an insistent part of him wanted the brunet to come on his own time, on his own pace, to look at what Jack made for him and for something utterly impossible to happen, because this was Hiccup's idea, this was his plan, and he could be here at any moment. And so like a fool, he did as he had for centuries: he waited, waited until the sun itself retreated into its vale, leaving

the world with only its stolen light as a solemn sentinel, something like heartbreak blooming under the moon's silent gaze as the cold numbed any sense of disappointment and worry and anger and fear. But it could not do the same for the pain.

"I don't think he's coming."

His eyes widened with surprise and before he turned to the voice behind him, he had to quickly plaster on his wide grin and playful demeanor because he was the Guardian of Fun, and even though it felt as if his heart had just been smashed by a freight train, that didn't mean he had to show it. "Toothâ€"I, uh, what? He, who's he, I meanâ€"|" But there was something in her eyes that made the ache even worse, knowing that there was this sickening pity in them and it made him nauseous despite the fear that was supposed to be dancing down his veins at the sight. He sighed, discarding the smiles and allowing her a small glance as to why some people call winter devastating. "So whatâ€"all of you guys know?" There was a quiet surrender in his voice, the lovely display of his season around them appearing lonely in the moonlight.

She hovered down to the lake where he stood, speaking quietly as if the weight of her words would shatter the ice around them. "We're worried about you, Jack."

At that, Jack gave a pitiful laugh, a pained sound devoid of any happiness. "What's there to be worried about?"

But they'd had enough of this, this hurt that their friend was going through and would go through again because though nothing is ever set in stone, there exists this one, horrible, inevitable fact: "Jackâ€"have you thought about what it's going to be like when this boy grows up?"

"Thought about it?" He gave her a hollow smile before it collapsed in on itself and only then did he stop the fragile charade. "That's the only thing running through my mind these days." His voice wavered in the night, sorrow bleeding into the confession.

Toothiana was quiet for a moment, the wind picking up in the apprehensive atmosphere. After a moment, she found her voice again. "He's a good kid, right?"

Jack forced another laugh, this one of fondness and bereavement. "Yeahâ€"one of the best I've ever met."

"Jack, I know it hurts now, butâ€"|"

"This is supposed to be the time you tell me that it's going to get better in the end, right?" His words cut like cold blades, sharp and caustic, causing the other Guardian to flinch. But he continued anyways, seeing as the floodgates had broken. "That it was a dumb mistake and that I need to let go and move on?" He gave another heartless laugh before turning away. "Save itâ€"I kinda knew from the beginning."

Tentatively, the woman approached him and placed a warm hand on his shoulder. "Noâ€"Jack, what I was going to sayâ€" was that I know it hurts now. It's going to hurt because we did our job, and pretty well I might add." She might've given him a rueful smile, but he was

much too busy concentrating on keeping himself together. "This boy grew up Jack. And he's going to continue to grow up to be wonderful adult. He doesn't need a Guardian anymore."

"Maybe I'm here because I want to be more than that to him."

The ice in his tone forced her to turn to him, eyes bright with alarm. "Jack you know more than I do"

"It won't work out, I know." He shrugged off her hand, eyes now gazing on dwindling stars. "He'll grow up. Leave me behind."

"Then what's keeping you here?" was her hushed response.

And when he turned once more to the Guardian of Memories, something more than sympathy was evoked, tearing at her heart, at the sight of the sheer agony in his eyes. "I don't know! I really don't maybe some stupid hope I still have, a dumb dream that things'll work out, me being an idiot and getting caught up in the wonders of being in love" And then quietly, a harsh and despairing whisper to no one in particular, "And maybe because for as long as I can remember I've never felt this about anyone before."

She saw it then a searing misery that haunted his thoughts, so deeply ingrained in the crevices of his heart that simple moments of fleeting happiness could fill because if she knew anything about memories it was that first loves left the deepest scars. But even so, "There'll be other chances, Jack."

His voice hardened. "What if I don't want other chances?"

The woman sighed, ignoring the clench in her own chest. "You're being impossible."

"So?!" There was a muted fury in the depths of those frozen blues, a collision of despair and longing swirling in a winter's storm. "You're the Tooth Fairy! Aster's the Easter Bunny, Sandy's the Sandman, North's Santa Clause!" His voice rose with each succession until he fell into a teary silence. "And I'm Jack Frost." The stinging in his eyes proved annoying; how was he supposed to make a point when warm beads of water trailed down his cheek in this pathetic display? His trembling voice wasn't making things any better. "Why, then that so many impossible things can happen when this one thing, falling in love with someone and being with them why can't that exist?" His eyes searched vainly for a flicker of truth in the darkened heavens, the moon and stars seeming to flare in response, though maybe they were only his own eyes catching the stagnant light with his sorrow's droplets. He turned away in disgust, only for Toothiana to provide an answer for him.

"Because for the impossible to happen, there has to be sacrifices." She remained resolute and unwavering as she said this, a firm power about her. "And this is part of those sacrifices. Are you willing to trade who you are and all that you do for this one boy?" Something lurid and commanding blazed in her eyes, demanding an answer from him in exchange.

"I I" Of course there was an answer to that but wide-eyed and overcome, Jack couldn't find his voice.

And triumphâ€"torn, broken, and austere resounded in her words. "You're hesitant because you know you _can't,_ Jack. The Man in the Moon chose _you_ for this job because you have something special to give to the worldâ€"and he knows you won't abandon the children that need you." She gestured about her, to winter's paradigm. "Look at what's happened." And Jack knew that what was to come was not praise for his abilities, a show of admiration to his skill and responsibility. "It's nearing springâ€"and you still have much to do. What about finding new Believers? What about being seen? What about giving kids _fun?_"

Noâ€"it was his wrongs, his errors, his selfishness, and his defiance, his lost chances, and a vicious reminder that... "Iâ€"never meant to stay this long." â€"aside from waiting, this was all he was good at: "Iâ€"screwed upâ€"huhâ€"

At that, Toothiana's eyes softened and she was by his side at once. "No, Jack. You're just in love." A sob escaped him from that; finally _someone_ _said_ it out loud, _someone_ _realized_ it too. Gentle hands rubbed his back as small trembles shot down his body, more and more of those damn tears flowing freely from his eyes as the woman soothed him. "I know you love him nowâ€"but I also know you can find someone else who'll make you happy, someone who won't leave you behind."

He startled her with a laugh, the sound soaked in resentment and anguish. "H-how are you so sure? Are you saying Iâ€"leave _him_ instead? J-just fly off andâ€" _never_ see him again?" And he so desperately wanted to ask her _how could he_, _how could she expect_ that of him, _when he waited, and waited, and spent his days by this boy's side, falling in love with him every second they were together since he first laid eyes on auburn hair, viridian eyes, and his crooked smile, to just suddenly rip out his heart and leave it behind to rot?

She shushed him, and miraculously the sharp gasps and quiet cries began to die down as she worked to calm the boyâ€"because beneath it all, he was still _just_ _a_ boy. _"Jack, growing up means letting go and moving on. And sometimes, the same can be said for love as well." This wasn't anything new; he'd heard that one before but he never really expected him to be on the receiving end of that line. And just like he saw so many times, through the years when he caught bitter tears falling on his snow from men, women, and children alike, in dramas and romances and in this world's stage, the simple truth stifled the fire until only a cold acceptance was left. "I'm not saying it should be foreverâ€"but I think that it's better to give it some time."

And it hurt to accept; it was _not_ _a_ bitter pill to swallow. It was swallowing hot coal, the cinders ashy and blistering on the tongue, choking him slowly as he forced the lump down his throat, feeling it scorch the inside of his skin and it was like smoke filled his lungs while it stole the warmth from his own still heart. It tasted of emptiness.

Toothiana's soft voice did little to balm the pain. "Do you understand, Jack?"

But he had done it, despite the torment, the torture, and the death of that wonderful light Hiccup filled him with. "â€"yeah."

She was hesitant now, and despite achieving her goal, the Guardian of Memories had to know, "Are youâ€"do you feel like you're ready to let him go?"

Jack chuckled, a sound of pure heartbreak. "Noâ€"and I don't think I ever willâ€" Her heart plummeted. "But I've put it off since the day I realized it."

Quietly, she reached for him but withdrew at the last second. Any closer, any more of the misery, any more of these horrible truths could break him. So she kept the most important one for herselfâ€"that Jack could leave right now, driven by his own choice and his own worries for the futureâ€"rather than disappear right before the boy's eyes, never having a choice, never getting a say, never giving him a proper _goodbye._ And although this was not the choice Jack would have preferred eitherâ€"it was at least a fragile solace that he could walk away right now rather than when it would hurt the most. "Are you going to tell him goodbye?" Because above all, Toothiana knew that at the very least, they both deserved that.

"Iâ€"will," he hollowly responded and Toothiana began to fear how many seasons would pass before Jack could truly smile again.

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"Oh gods, there you are! Jack, I'm _so _sorry! I-I fell asleep while I was doing homework a-and Iâ€" He stopped as something unsettling gripped the air. Hiccup took a step forward, his eyes trained on the silent figure by the doorway. "â€"hey, are you okay?"

Jack lifted his head, eyes stinging from something that not even tears could purge and took a long look at Hiccup, his hair tousled and clothes sloppily thrown over his body in a hurry, eyes bright with worry and regret masking his face. Jack forced a chuckle and hoped his voice was steady enough. "Wow, you get freaked out over the littlest of things, don'cha?"

Hiccup breathed a sigh of relief but that did nothing to ease the anxiety that permeated his bedroom. "I figured you'd be pissed at me for making you wait out in the cold all night."

Jack tried for a wry smile. "You're forgetting who I am, aren't you?" Againâ€"it was a good thing that Hiccup couldn't see him.

The teen rolled his eyes as he sat down on the bed. "Right, sorry. This was _you_ I was worrying about." But noâ€"something was wrong. This was wrong. He felt like shit after waking up and seeing that it was almost five hours past the time of their daâ€"_outing. _He figured Jack would've stopped by, awoken him with a fresh snowball to the face, frozen his forehead to the desk_, anything_â€" "So, just to get things straight, you're not mad right?" But why didn't he?

All the teen could see was the slightest of shrugs from the shadowy figure as Jack's listlessly toned voice droned on. "Nah, I mean you do your job. Andâ€"I guess it's time I did mine."

"Huh?"

Jack sat down beside him, relishing the last time he'd everâ€¦_no_it's not time to think about that. "It's the end of February and Winter's not getting any younger." He tried for a smile again, liking that it was easier to mimic the emotion in his voice than on his lips. "I kind ofâ€¦have a job to do."

Hiccup felt his heart sink. "Ohâ€¦I guess we sorta kept you here, huh?" Was this the dread he had been feeling? It had to be.

He draped an arm over Hiccup's shoulders, pulling the teen in close, silently praying no matter how many winters passed, he would never forget this warmth. "I chose to stay. But this timeâ€¦I guess there's really no choice but toâ€¦" his voice faltered as tears welled up in his eyes and _damnit all _he can't cry now. "Go and make up for the lost time."

And just because it felt right and just because Hiccup had a horrible feeling that he wouldn't be able to do something like this again for a long time, he leaned his head against Jack, the familiar and encompassing cold slowly calming his stormy thoughts. "Did something happen while I wasn't there?"

Jack felt his heart race, each beat resonating an awful throb that he uselessly attempted to will away. "Yeah, a, uh, _friendly_ reminder from a fellow Guardian toâ€¦do what has to be done."

"Iâ€¦seeâ€¦" Hiccup felt as though he had just swallowed bile, the acid lingering in his mouth causing his words to grow hoarse. "Well, I won't lie. It definitely won't be as interesting without you here." In fact, just the thought of it left Hiccup in despair, childishly hoping that it would always be winter, it would always be like this, it would always just be him and Jackâ€¦but he'd _never_ tell him something like that. "But what you doâ€¦it's important, so, I guessâ€¦" Hiccup felt his heart clench in small, reverberating aches, but he breathed in slowly, ignoring the alien emotion. "Best of luck to you," he recited emptily.

"Yeah, you tooâ€¦"and just uhmâ€¦" Oh _fuck_ it hurt to breathe right then, seeing those beautiful green eyes looking at him like they were about to lose all the wonder and magic it would ever see. "Remember to have fun sometimes, all right?" Because, at the very least, he hoped Hiccup would remember himâ€¦because he knew he could never forget Hiccup.

"Yeahâ€¦I will." There was a slight hesitancy before Hiccup worked with his mastery of spontaneity and pulled Jack into a hug, crushing the Guardian to him and burying his head on his shoulder, hoping to dear God Jack didn't catch sight of those embarrassing tears that threatened to spill. He relaxed as Jack hesitantly wrapped his arms around his lithe back, holding him firmly in place. "And, as a favor to the rest of us, stay out of trouble, okay?" It was cold, soothing fiery fears.

Jack chuckled, nuzzling the crown of the teen's head. "I make no promises." It was warm, melting the pain.

In fact, when Hiccup drew back, the aches disappeared altogether as Jack's heart stopped at the sensation of warm fingers grazing the skin of his jaw, trailing to his cheeks. "You knowâ€¦I still can't see you," the teen confessed, familiarizing himself with the contours

of the Guardian's face.

And just because it felt right, he allowed his own fingers to trail across freckled skin, marveling at the other boy's heat, treasuring the precious blush that blossomed from his touch. "I knowâ€|" He dropped his hand to the teen's scarf, ignoring the agonizing constriction in his chest, as he fixed the cloth, praying that the little snowflakes remainedâ€|when he couldn't.

Dazed by the other boy's actions, Hiccup was quick to dispel the enthralling air between them. "Well, when you visit, I guess we can work on that." His face dropped to a frown, a wrinkle of worry on his brow. "You _will_ visit, right?"

Jack nodded, heart devoid of love and rhythm. "Yeah, I will."
'Liar,' his mind accused.

Hiccup must've known too because there was a deep pain in his eyes at that response, though he said nothing of it. Instead, the teen withdrew completely, a definite space between them as he coughed and said, "So I guess I'll see ya then?" with a wooden smile.

And if Hiccup could pretend that everything was okay, then Jack supposed he could too. "Was that a pun?" he accused.

There was a weak, insincere laugh, and it all felt like happiness falling away, an enchanting illusion shattered as eventually, Jack found his way to the open window, the night grave and desolate. He took one last glance and was torn between burning the last image of Hiccup he had to his memoryâ€|or to burn the image from his mind because the last thing he remembered of him shouldn't be his awkward stance, his hesitating goodbyes, or the mute anguish in his eyes. But what could he do? Ask him to smile? Ask him to give Jack a _genuine_ laugh? Ask him to give him one last sweet blush? How could he? How could he when everything he did was no more of a travesty than what Hiccup gave him?

So he didn't. Jack turned to the sky, a pitiful, "Rightâ€|see yaâ€|" as his mockery of a goodbye. And he swallowed the fire, letting it burn all the way throughâ€|"the only semblance of warmth he had.

The words felt like a bitter lie on his tongue as he left.

* * *

><p>Title based on the song of the same name by Owl City. Also, it's a bit of a play on words with the earlier chapter of Cupid and Carpathia.<p>

Also, to** Hello there**: Don't worry! I'm not offended or anything like that! And I like the honesty of what you're saying. But believe me, this story was kind of headed down that path since I started writing the first chapters. The plot was already in my head, so it really didn't turn clichÃ© all of the sudden. Forgive me, but I am far from a professional writer, but I appreciate the former high expectations.

And I get that making it easier to read for others is very important. I've had lessons on that again and again, but I've also learned that it depends on the target audience, which I suppose I need time to

adjust to. I used to write for competition and so a lot of my work had to contain some complexities. This is the same exploration of theme that I used in school for English as well. I know this sounds defensive, but I'm not trying to be, really. I just want to explain why I write the way I write and to answer why I've suddenly decided to write these long descriptions: Because I've always had. They do serve a purpose in motifs and symbolism that I'm trying to convey, but in the end, they're just _fun_ to write. I write because it's fun. They weren't there before because I didn't have the time to add them when I updated during school, but in the summer, I finally had the opportunity. I'm sorry you don't appreciate them, but all I can do about that is to try and tone it down? Haha ^^;

Sorry if you find the plot now cliché, sappy, and annoying and I'll try to be better at this story-writing thing in future if I do ever make another fanfiction after this one (and no, don't worry, my choice in perhaps discontinuing my writing is because of college). So honestly, thank you! I know I needed to hear that and I know why as well. I've been waiting for someone to call me out on it. I don't think I can change much at this point, but I'll make good use of that for future reference.

-The captain must go down with the ship after all-

17. Valencia and the Viking

Well, so...I hope this chapter makes up for the previous one...almost? Haha...this one's a bit shorter too.

Oh lord over 300 reviews? I don't know what to say but uhm (you probably hear this a lot from me) thanks so much for reading!

****Just Call Me Endy****, again, thanks for everything.

****Warnings: ****Cupid. Oh and a bit of swearing.

****Disclaimer****: I own nothing but a laptop and certain plot elements.

* * *

<p>Love was not a kind thing.</p>

Many souls delude themselves into believing otherwise, simply because it is so much _better_ to bask in its innocence, and in the romance, and in those sugary emotions that their hearts simply _ached_ for, rather than to face its true form: a pretty little _farce_ coating the sheer _ugliness_ it veiled, the _malice_ it created, the _hurt_ it caused, and the _sins_ it harbored.

Love was not a kind thing.

Love was demanding, Cupid knew, as it consumed all patience, fortitude, cowardice, wrath, greed, care, fear, happiness, euphoria, melancholy, bitterness, and even its devilled twin, hate. This one emotion was the amassment of all the good things and bad, flecked with unending confusion and conflict.* It overrode and overtook all else, completely engrossing itself into its victim's consciousness

and latched on deep like a parasite, slowly driving one to subliminal highs with its saccharine venom while deteriorating what remained of its drugged host. It settled into the heart and slowly ripped apart the flesh to make an abode for itself, a carnal and self-serving beast.

Love _destroyed._

And as shameful as it was, Cupid almost forgot that one fact herself.

After all, when all was said and done, it was nothing more than just another failed _experiment_, _because_ she, _once_ _again_, decided to blindly devote herself to feeding this wretched fire that slowly consumed the soul. And yet no matter how _beautiful_ it had been, no matter how _sweet_ and _innocent_ it was, the little seed she planted, tended, and protected as she poured what was left of her will and faithâ€¦The cruel little thing _withered_ before it could even _bloom_â€”just like _so_ many others.

Was it too much to _hope_? Was it too much to _wish_? Was it too much to ask for a validation of her existence? Was it too much to hold her breath as the Day of Love approached for a _sign_, a confession, a revelation, an epiphany, _anything_ at all!â€”other than just the two idly losing themselves in a daze of secular notions and ethereal obligations?

(And _yes_ it was selfish to think so, _selfish_ to believe that _love_ should bare a heavier cost than the two because _love_ encompasses both and it positively _killed her_ to know that it all crumbled to dust so easily.)

But her wretched holiday came and passed with nothing to show for it other than a taunting anticipation unfulfilledâ€¦

Cupid lifted her head and gazed at the boy's portrait. Suspended by spider-thread from unseen rafters, the boy's image left her rather contemplative this morning. Or rather, it was the silk that bound them that she found herself fixated with. The night of Jack's departure should have marked the weakening of the dual-shaded strand. Yet it remained, the thickness and strength almost nonplussed by the incident, dormant in wait for some luckless miracle that would never come. She shook her head, willing the bleak promise away. Some say that separation often left love at its heightâ€”and Cupid somewhat agreed. Nevertheless, the matter hardly applied as the telltale signs of its decay were already coating the fragile silk.

Hamish "Hiccup" Haddock III's visage only looked on with grim silence as the Deity of Love approached the murky-colored strand that connected him with the Ice Spirit, unmoving eyes trained on her winged back before she wandered farther and farther to where the two shades of red met. All the while, her thoughts remained on the tie she followed, a dismal gaze lingering on her wasted effort. It remained stubbornly fixed between the two and Cupid _vowed_ to eradicate this pathetic _shame_ and _failure_ today. Never mind that Jack would continue to pine for the mortal boy that would no sooner forget him altogether, never mind the boy that would unjustly lose the first resemblance of _love_ he ever had to _fate's_ cruel design, _never mind_ that Cupid pledged to _never_ interfere again.

With hollow hearts came a hollow existence. There was nothing more to be said and one more thing to be done.

The hall echoed with her footfalls as she gripped the Old Crone's* blade, readying to sever the ties that uselessly bound the Winter Guardian and the boy. She felt no sense of dread, no sense of humiliation or disgrace, and not a drop of melancholy resounded in her bones as she approached where despairing glimmers of blood-red-love kissed the pitiable shade of rose, the color rotting with grief and heartbreak. One last glare was thrown at the exact spot where the two colors collided, the Deity of Love pausing for the briefest of moments to preserve the memory in her thoughts for the years to come. It was such a shame, really. It would have beenâ€|quite a sightâ€|a beautiful sight that would have made Cupid doubt love's true natureâ€|had the silk glimmered wholly in ruby ardor â€|had the boy and the Guardianâ€|

No.

There was no room for regret now. Such thoughts were useless, after all. Not when she held the end at her very fingers. She clutched the blade, feeling the ancient instrument awaken at her command and immediately, the air about her reeked of a heavy tension, the acrid sensation of death shooting chills down her spine. The shear was raised and Cupid could only watch dully as it gleamed with a wicked smile, a distortion of her own blank face on its hungry edge. There was another sigh from her mouth before Cupid gripped the wilting color of the mortal boy to steady the twine as it quivered and trembled, as if knowing of its demise. But she scoffed at the thought and almost immediately felt disgusted for it. Valencia wished, oh how she dearly wished she could mourn for her actions. But she felt nothing as she lowered the bladeâ€|

Except for this unpleasant stickiness at her fingertips.

She pulled back, bewildered as she examined her hand. As she observed the viscid substance that coated her skin from holding the boy's thread, Cupid sheathed the shear away, calming her racing heart, the impudent thing daring to hope yet again, only for the woman's cold logic to discard its pleas. The material was a translucent shade, mirroring the teenager's feelings for the Ice Spirit and all at once, she felt foolish for frightening herself once more; the boy's thread was already decaying without her help.

And maybe it was petty, maybe she wanted one last hand in helping these two star-crossed lovers, and maybe she wanted nothing more than to end things as they were before she retreated, thoroughly lessoned in what should have been taught years before she had the slightest flicker of optimism, and maybe it was because she wanted to give her own farewell to the boysâ€|a thanks for giving me hope and crushing it soundly, a thanks for enduring this horrible emotion, a thanks for nothing and may things work out miraculously all right for you both for the remainder of this pathetic lifeâ€|but call it Fate, call it Chance, and maybe you could even call it Loveâ€|

Because when she readied the act once more, the Old Crone's blade singing to sever within its tomb, a speck of flaring bright red caught her eye, a speck of flaring bright red beneath the segment where her own fingers tore off a deceiving layer of the boy's

love-line that made her breath catch and eyes widen with absolute shock. She barely registered her own actions before Valencia found herself at the mortal's end of the tie, peeling the dull coating away, thoughts swarming and heart thudding loudly against her chest as she uncovered more and more of that _beautiful, lovely, wonderful, perfect_ shade of red beneath its first skin—red, the color she never loved though it was definitely starting to rapidly move up the list, as she felt something hot and watery trail down her face while her eyes went blurry and began to ache.

She laughed, decidedly feeling that it was okay to be foolish and that it was okay to cry and that it was okay to _hope_—

Because _this boy is in love_.

Her Domain echoed with sobbing and happy bursts of her idiocy and her bliss—and that was perfectly all right. Because the Guardians might have gotten away with separating Jack and this boy when she was at her weakest, when the love between the two became strained, but that didn't mean that she couldn't—

No.

Valencia steeled herself and forced the venomous thought from her mind. She would not manipulate _fate_ for _love_.

Never again.

But that didn't mean she couldn't do _something, anything, everything_ in _her_ power to make it all _right_. She shakily stood, wiping the tears as they ran freely, took a breath, and gathered her thoughts, ignoring the small hiccups in her throat. Love was many things. Love was simple, love was complex, love was acceptance, love was prejudice, and love—love meant chances—and doing what it took to make things right.

But as these trickles of morale stirred a fire she once believed was doused, Valencia watched as tiny fibers wove themselves together, encasing the fiery and vibrant red with its dull façade. She gazed curiously at the observation; it was obviously connected to the boy's sentiments towards _love_, _but the true answer was yet to be uncovered. The sticky cover over Hamish's thread was troubling; something must have caused its accumulation, its function for _protection_. But it was a start—this was a _solid_ foundation to build herself from.

With that in mind, it was no surprise that the first audible word she spoke (or rather, _screamed_) was: "_BARTOK!_"

The shrill cry echoed for a few seconds before the familiar trilling of squeaks and chatter reached the Deity of Love in the form of her wary and exhausted assistant, scuttling along woven webs and silky mazes to her side. She scooped the little Love-Dweller in her arms, ignoring its pleas to be released and gave him an excited grin while soothing the fretting creature, "Now, little one—calm yourself. What say you and I have a—walk, just like old times, hm?"

The creature stilled, critically eyeing her with all eight of its beady oculars. He squealed once, translating roughly to, "Where?"

She gave a laugh of incredulity. "Well, outside of course!" She ignored the horrified way his eyes widened and his futile struggling against his hold, but sighed a second later, forcing her assistant to meet her gaze. "Bartok, please" At that, the arachnid stiffened, this time eyes open with wonder at his Mistress. "I need your help, okay? I can fix this" but I just need to know how first." He had not heard her plead in centuries" perhaps close to a millennium. But upon gazing at those eyes of wounded cherry, the creature almost seemed to sigh before relaxing in her arms. This Love-Dweller would never think of abandoning his Mistress in her time of need.

Besides" it was rather exciting to think that she was returning to the field again.

He chirped a few times, translating to, "Okay" where to exactly?"

She gave him a smile and the little creature nearly broke out in hysterics at the sight of such an honest expression on Valencia's face. "That depends" where does Hamish Haddock III live, again?" Something like dread pitted itself in his stomach. Yes, something was definitely off with his Mistress, but he'd see that she went through this all right. It was his job after all.

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He'd see to that scrape. It was his job after all.

Hiccup sighed as he gingerly applied the disinfectant on the little girl's knee. "Okay Sophie" you gotta be brave now, all right?" The girl sniffled, watching curiously between fat droplets of tears as her babysitter dabbed a bit more of that weird cold stuff onto the cotton swab and swirled it around her wound. Green eyes flickered to meet hers as a calming voice murmured, "Now, I won't lie to you" this is going to sting." The like hell part was aptly left out as the soaked cotton made its way to the angry, red area.

Hiccup should've seen that swift kick to his chest coming a mile away. Still, at least it meant there was no substantial damage to Sophie's knee after her accident. The teen gasped; too bad the same couldn't be said of his bruising torso. He cringed, meeting the gaping girl's eyes. "See? N-not too bad right"?" He collected himself quickly and tried not to breathe too much as he applied the Band-Aid (a Disney Princess Aurora Band-Aid) and gave her a sheepish smile. "Well, at least for you, I'm hoping."

The little girl flexed her knee, giving a toothy grin at the sight of her favorite story-book princess, and ignored the slight twinge it brought to her slight injury; out of sight, out of mind after all. "Thank you," she cooed before hopping off the couch and clumsily embracing her babysitter.

He barely had time to give a bewildered "You're welcome," in reply before she dashed off" probably to see her brother outside where she got the accident in the first place.

There was a soft sigh from the brunet as he sat back down on the couch, blankly gazing at the opened first-aid kit he needed to put

away. Hiccup could only give a faint smile before it finally registered to him that there wasn't anyone else here to fool. The Bennett house, full of its laughs, full of its innocence and charm, and its love, now dimmed in silence as the afternoon sun lowered across the endless sky. It was empty, he realized. Both Jamie and Sophie were playing with the neighborhood kids, relishing of what was left of this season's frost.

Frost.

Jack, his mind whispered but he quelled the uneasy ache in his chest. It was stupid; he knew. The guy had a job to do after all, and Hiccup honestly tried to feel guilty about distracting him from itâ€|but he couldn't. He wasn't about to regretâ€|what happenedâ€|

What almost happenedâ€|

between them. Not only that, but it would be selfish to keep wishing for Jack to stop by and _waste_ more time with him.

If he would at all.

And it was so, so, so _stupid_ feeling like his heart was just torn from its chest when really, it was still thereâ€|it was still there, beating continuously in that perpetual _lub-dub_ and so what if it happened to _hurt_ whenever he so much as _thought_ about Jack? It had only been whatâ€|three? four weeks? It was _fine_, or so he told himself when he returned home and his room seemed lonelier than ever, lonelier than when he first moved out of his country and everything familiar he had known, and _warm_ like the silence suffocating and drowning him in this agonizing heat, even when he kicked off the sheets and stilled for a moment because he had to _be_ careful not to wake Jack_â€|and oh! Only to remember that _Jack_ wasn't there andâ€|

Yeahâ€|it hurt. It hurt more than it should.

Even Toothless gave him pitiable stares from time to time whenever this thoughts lingered a little too long out the window, as if replaying the farewell scenario in sickening repeat. The feline could sense his friend's distress but they both knew that there was nothing either of them could do but he mewed and demanded attention, if only for a while, to _distract_ him from this _thing_ he was hurting from, from this _thing_ that kept him up at night, from this _thing_ that died inside him the night Jack walked out of his life. It was a thing he couldn'tâ€|_didn't_ want toâ€|_name_, a thing that he _feared_ above all else, a _thing_ that haunted his mind and ridiculed his heart.

Hiccup found himself fidgeting with the scarf. It wasâ€|something like soothing to the ache. Although sometimes, it made it much worse. That was because the little snowflakes of ice-blue were beginning to fade away, vanishing one-by-one every few days since Jack'sâ€|departure. Hiccup realized that it was still a stunning scarf, in its sheen of white and velvety textureâ€|but it wouldn't have that _touch_ of winter on it anymore. It left it empty.

Empty.

Hiccup stopped counting how many of the little flakes were left.

Swallowing a groan, the teen forced himself off the couch and towards the medicine cabinet, first-aid kit in hand and resolve in his eyes. It was ridiculous. Positively ridiculous.

For the past fifteen years of his life, Hiccup had been fine! Not great, but he had been okay with it. It had its ups and downs, its twists and turns, and he knew well that it would keep cycling like that until the day he keeled over and dies. Life was a wonderful thing. A gift, really. It didn't stop until the heart did for a good five to ten minutes, and it didn't forgive errors or recognize triumphs. It just kept goingâ€|moving forwardâ€|

And sometimes, the brain had to wake up, and catch up, before time slipped through one's hands and before that person recognized that that time had died, with a dreadful and terrifying feeling called regret.

So it was without regret that after storing the medical supplies in its respective drawer, Hiccup decided that maybe now was a good time to check up on the kids and now was the time to think about just letting these troubling thoughts go, because if Jack could just up and go, why should he have to remain in that painful and depressing state when the Frost Spirit was likely having just a good 'ol time without him, spreading fun, and happiness, and Winter while Spring nipped at his heels this March, never mind the fact that Hiccup had never heard him sound more broken than he had that night when he left, because it was probably just his imagination when it seemed like Jack wanted to tell him something else before he left, tell him something should he had gotten the chance to if Hiccup hadn't fallen asleep, and it probably was just his imagination that Jack was reluctant to leave because it hurt more to leave than to just stay with himâ€|and Hiccup knew it was just his imaginationâ€|

â€|the moment he looked to the window and caught a glimpse of a very familiar shadow enclosed by a horde of children, a flurry of flakes dancing about him even though the weather reports claimed there was to be no more snowfall for the remainder of the weekâ€|the moment when Hiccup thought the scene was too surreal, too impossibleâ€|and too private for him to intrude. Hiccup knew that night's musing must have been just his imagination the moment he swallowed his heart back down into his chest, and called out, "Jamie, Sophie! Your mom wants you to know she'll be home in an hour!", and then opened the door to the yard, stopping right in his tracks at the sight of a faint shadow vanishing from his very sight as the crowd of children dispersed with poorly-masked disappointed faces.

Hiccup made sure he did a much better job.

"O-oh, uhm, okay Hiccup," the eldest Bennett replied with a shaky smile. "Thanks for watching us."

The teen shrugged and countered with a lazy smile. "Not a problem."

It must've been his imagination, but as the nine-year-old turned,

Hiccup could've sworn he saw Jamie sulk at the sky, a heavy burden of sorrow on the child.

And Hiccup knew better than to question it. It was Jack's choice _when_ he wanted to go see Hiccup.

(If he wanted to go see Hiccup.)

And it was Jack's choice to leave him behind and never see him again, too, because the one thing Hiccup was sure _wasn't_ just his imagination _was_ the absolute _lie_ in the Guardian's voice when he said he'd come back to see him. If he got bored of hanging out with a teenager with too much responsibilities, if he got bored of the oddball teen with nothing better to do than school work and following along with Winter's whims, if he got bored of _him_, then that was an incident like _that_ wasn't the _first_ time it had happened in these three or four weeks and Hiccup doubted it would be the _last_ time either, and Hiccup would be _damned_ if he played this game.

He was stubborn and he knew it. It was one of those lovely attributes that _life_ blessed him with.

Yeah life was a _wonderful thing_.

Or so he kept telling himself.

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Cupid knew, despite _centuries_ since her last venture out into the more direct approaches to her duty, that this approach was _unorthodox_.

To say the least.

Because sitting here in the dark, waiting for the boy to come home into his room felt all sorts of wrong in all sorts of ways. It was difficult enough trying to get past that mongrel feline; in the end, she did feel somewhat unpleasant for leaving the job to Bartok and she could only hope the poor thing had gotten the job done right. Though, judging by the loud mewls emitting from the boy's dresser and her companion safely, albeit wearily, leaning against the handle, the efforts were fruitful. She sighed. It was troublesome, but it was necessary, she supposed, and was reminded of the fact each time she took a breath

The room reeked of _heartbreak_.

It hung in the air, heavy like a perfume of dying flowers, a sweetness rotting away, of tears unshed and words unspoken, of love and its loss; it left the atmosphere dim, a faint acrimony lingering in the walls and seeping through her very pores, a melancholy creeping into her skin, a soreness resounding in her heart's cadence. It was a lonely room, half of its purpose was stolen away, only a phantasm of happiness that once presided there, that very happiness fading and fading until only a hollow memory was left without visions of smiles and the songs of laughter to remember by only a perpetual ache attached to a name without significance.

Somehow, it still amazed her how thoroughly love could devastate.

Yet what amazed her even more was how she managed to sit in total silence for hours just waiting for the boy.

And as if some higher power finally took heed of her, the distinct sound of a door opening and slamming echoed throughout the house. She breathed a silent prayer of thanks as the call of, "Toothless, I'm home!" floated its way up the stairs and through the door, slightly ajar just for her ears to catch. "Toothless?" Oh good—judging by the impending footfalls, the boy was making his way up the stairs and towards the door with a hand peeking out to flick on the lights and— "Toothless, where are—"Holy _shit_!" Well then; the boy had quite the mouth on him, that was for sure. Fortunately, his little outburst was not aimed at Valencia. The teen backed away quickly to the opposite wall of where the meowing cabinet and Bartok presided. "That—is a huge-ass spider—" he whispered with awed horror as he reached for an English II textbook on his desk with less than friendly intentions towards the chirping arachnid.

Valencia tsk'd. "I'd appreciate it if you didn't kill my assistant." There was just a spark of sadistic glee in her eyes as she watched the boy nearly trip over thin air in quick, panicky movements as he searched for the intruding presence. She cleared her throat and advanced towards him. "I'd also appreciate it if you didn't make fun of his weight—he's quite sensitive about it, you know."

"Wh-what? Who—" He relaxed somewhat, as though familiar with the situation. But his eyes were alight with suspicion and an underlying fear; she must have been quite the sight to him. "Who are you?"

Cupid shrugged. "That's not very important."

"Even if so, I think I'd feel a lot better if you told me." His eyes darted to and fro across the room, in a desperate search for something. Eventually, green eyes glared back at her, mild terror glittering prettily in his irises. "Where's Toothless?" was his demand.

"My name is Valencia. You can call me Val," she said plainly and jabbed her thumb towards her silent subordinate. "And he's in the drawer. Sorry about that, but your little friend seemed rather hostile towards us."

There was a frightening amount of amusement in her voice and Hiccup never did like that predatory sound that made him feel like helpless prey. "Right, I'm sorry; he tends to get that way with trespassers," the teen drawled as he maneuvered towards the bureau, eyes never leaving the tall figure. Sure, sarcasm wasn't the best weapon; it was a double-edged sword that would deal considerable self-damage should he provoke this Val, but it was the only one he had. Thankfully, the large spider had scurried to his Mistress's side by the time Hiccup turned and opened the drawer, sighing in relief at the sight of the familiar mess of black fur. "Toothless! You okay, bud?" He winced as he withdrew his fingers from the glossy wood, coated in spider-silk.

The cat butted his head against his other hand in a display of reassurance, the feline hissing fiercely the next moment at the figures behind him.

"He's fine, I promise you. A little shaken at best, I suppose," came the eerie lilt of a feminine voice.

"Okay, Val!" Hiccup turned, not quite surprised that the figure had yet to move from her spot in the middle of his room. "Now that you've given me your name, mind answering what exactly are you?"

Her laugh was chilling, little spider-legs trailing down his back at the mere sound of its ghastly trill. "Rude boy. I've answered your question but you've yet to let me ask mine."

"Well, I'm not the one breaking and entering," the teen defended, willing himself to remain calm. Should he run, he would no doubt be apprehended and most likely suffer injury. Should he call for help, no doubt no one would be able to hear him—and he might suffer injury. Should he fight— Hiccup relaxed his posture, though not out of repose. "But fine—why are you here?"—hah—that had never been an option.

The odd creature hummed for a moment as Hiccup eased himself out of the corner and towards the ominous form, heart thrumming and alive with patient horror; it likened to awaiting a grim diagnosis, pending a death sentence, the sensation of slowly losing oxygen—it wasn't blind panic, but a steady pace of calamity like a crescendo as time slowed its passage, an excruciating bide for the climactic crash. And all at once, the moment was delivered with a swift tilt of the figure's head: "First off, I doubt you would have let me in—given your—track record, I would have guessed you'd have had enough of myths."

His heart stopped and something like cold fear gripped him, plunging him down to acrid waters to drown. "You—you know Jack?"

"Not personally, no." Valencia crossed her arms and frowned at the stricken expression on the boy's face. "And that's the third question I've answered for you," she pointedly remarked.

"Then what do you want?" he spat, anger and dread melding together in short staccato breaths, unknowing if the shaking of his hands were due to one or the other and maybe even both.

"Answers," Valencia replied. She paused for a second or so before declaring, "And that makes four."

Hiccup swallowed, unsure if answers were all she was after. "Well that would depend—what do you wanna know?" Because trust was such a fragile thing, and between strangers who met for one moment and departed from the windows of each other's lives the next; so much could be given, so much could be taken, and everything could be broken within a lifetime, a few weeks, or a few minutes of meeting.

Cupid focused on the boy's glare: it was trained at her face, yet did not meet her eyes. "—You can't see me—can you." It wasn't a question.

But Hiccup would count it as one. "I can only see a faint outline," he confessed.

"A shadow?"

Hiccup congratulated himself that although his heart suddenly plummeted to the pit of his stomach, he was quite confident that he didn't outwardly show it. "Yeahâ€¦a shadow." Heâ€¦should really learn to keep them out of his room from now on. Maybe invest in some sort of supernatural-repellant.

The woman congratulated herself for not allowing (as much) venom to seep into her voice. "Just like Jack?"

This time, the shock wasn't so easy to disguise. "Iâ€¦" And good God, did his chest always have to clench like that at the not-so-friendly reminder? That he hadn't ever seen him and probably never would? That all he had were brittle memories, a goddamned scarf as the only physical reminder, and a half-assed goodbye to show for it? That he leftâ€¦and all Hiccup ever got to see was a glimpse of blue and the act of a pitiful lie. But the teen merely breathed out, exhaling what was left of the ache into the stagnant air. "â€¦don't have to answer that."

"You already did," Cupid stated, her callous voice fanning that scorching and scathing fire broiling the teen from the inside.

"What else do you want?" he gritted out, because as good a job as she was doing, he doubted she came here just to torment him over this silly little hurt inside that was slowly eating him alive.

Far be it to say that Valencia was inwardly berating herself for irritating the poor boy; Heaven only knew what troubles and heartaches he had been trialed through, so she still felt something akin to remorse, but not quite. So she would be honestâ€¦"I don't think you'd believe me if I said, 'to help.' Soâ€¦let's go for 'I have something to prove.' Tell me, will you believe that?" Well, as honest as she could be without forfeiting too much information. Nothing good could come out of knowing the Deity of Love stood before him for an interrogation and a few expositions about his not-quite-boyfriend.

Hiccup scoffed, ill-masked resentment resounding in his words, off-key, a sour note breaking the melody. "It's not like believing ever made a difference."

Oh? "And what makes you say that?" Though it wasâ€¦unethical at best, the woman knew she hit a sore spot and she knew she would have to exploit it.

"Everything!" No, it wasn't anger there; anger composed such a small and insignificant role in this novel song; it belonged to that of despair and anguish, singing straight through the blacks of night from the depths of a shattering heart, of misery and confusionâ€¦of love unconsummated, roaring with deafening howls to voiceless stars, an echoing emptiness as the pleas fell away. "You already know about Jack, so you should be able to figure it out."

She exaggerated a sigh, a lurid breath of irritation. "Dear boy, I broke into your house and waited for nearly three hours in your bedroom because I couldn't do just that." At leastâ€¦much could be said of the truthâ€¦in the moments of passion.

"Then you're asking the wrong person!" It was a loud crash behind the mere insurgence of frustration and desolation and it could be seen, plain as starlight in those eyes, narrowed with fury and watering with grief. "Because I don't get it eitherâ€¦" It was a familiar tune to the Deity of Love: it was the song of secrets thieved from their guard, the clamor of barriers and masks discarded to the floor, the defenses' surrender, the heart's pieces at the brink of blight once more. "I hear Jack's voice, I feel his touch, and when we're together, nothing else could be more real to me. Gods, I put everything I believe in to this one guy!" And if that wasn't loveâ€¦then Cupid would have hung up her wings a long time ago. "â€¦but despite all that's worth," there was a pained laugh and Cupid heard more than felt something inside the boy break. "â€¦the closest thing I got was a glimpse of his eyesâ€¦"

And if that wasn't what Cupid was looking for, then it was a brilliant place to start. "Hisâ€¦_eyes_â€¦" Her breath hitched and an awful sensation of overwhelming apprehension and blazing excitement welled up within her; she supposed this was what people called _hope_. "What color are they?"

Hiccup didn't know whether to be thankful she seemed to ignore the majority of his outburst or to be insulted. "Ice bluesâ€¦like glaciers under the arctic sun." As if registering his own words, he coughed nervously, as though trying to expel his embarrassment. His blushing cheeks, however, did little to aid his situation. "And uh, yeah, before you ask, I'm not guessing and I didn't ask Jamie or anyone else for help with that eitherâ€¦" Well, what else did this woman want? He already made a complete idiot out of himself by saying all that.

"Did you ever tell Jack?" she demanded with a budding enthusiasm cleverly cloaked by impatience.

'_Why would that matter?' _"No I mean, it's not very exciting news " "

"You little _fool_," she hissed.

Hiccup drew back, this time unsure if he should be frightened or offended. "Excuse me?"

The teen should have feared for his life the moment when that shadowy figure rushed to him; then again, it wasn't the first time a pair of opaque arms trapped him soundly in a hug. "You marvelous little fool." Valencia decidedly ignored the boy's squeak of terror as well as the cat's enraged yowl.

The brunet gulped; although this was surely not an uncommon position, that didn't mean he enjoyed being a myth's teddy bear. (Hence, JÃkul.) "You're starting to scare meâ€¦"

Valencia pulled back, and though she knew he couldn't see it, she perhaps hoped that due to practice, the teen would be able to recognize the grin on her face just from her voice. "Yes—love is a scary thing, isn't it?"

What a wonderful shade of red he turnedâ€”if only he'd allow his side of the thread to burn just as brightly. "L__love?_" Hiccup sputtered.

Beside him, Toothless gave a feral hiss.

She released the boy, but took hold of his shoulders, commanding his focus. "Look, you don't have to understand nowâ€|but would you forgive Jack?"

He blinked, bewildered by the question. "What?"

"Forgive him. Forgive him for being a coward and running away." She was more than aware of the confounded expression gracing the boy's features and more than aware of the slippery implications from her brash words, but right now _she didn't care. _"Would you forgive him completely, utterly, wholly_, and let him be a part of your _life_ again?" She desperately searched in his eyes for that one flicker of truth. "Do you _want_ him to be a part of your life?"

In a state of shock, truly, sarcasm was Hiccup's best friend. "Sure, if he said '_please_.'" But upon the woman's tightened grip on his shoulders, he sighed an unenthusiastic "â€|and of course," from his mouth.

Against herself, the Deity giggled. "You're a cheeky one, aren't you? Neverthelessâ€|you answered well." She released him from her clutches, watching with pleased exasperation as the boy retreated a few steps back. "Ohâ€|and to answer why you can't see himâ€|" A wan smile adorned her lips, eyes glowing with something akin to a millennia's wisdom. "It's because this," she indicated with a finger directed to his head, "_Believes...And this" and then did the same to his heart, "..._doesn't_."

And she saw it now, unmistakably so. It was _fear_ and it was _love._ This boy didn't truly believe his Guardian would be thereâ€|he was too smart and knew full well that Jack _would_ have to leave him in the endâ€|and in the end, he'd be aloneâ€|and in the end, he was _afraid_ of being vulnerable. His heart had yet to open itself to _love_, to truly embrace its precious burden without knowing that his sacrifice would be reciprocatedâ€| without knowing that Jack felt the same. _Fear_ kept him tethered to this oblivionâ€|of hidden hearts and enigmatic emotion. This _fear_ of the demising ambrosia called loveâ€|This fear of _her_. _Falling in love_ was so easyâ€|but _loving_, making it through, having happiness at the mercy of another, that was _hard_, and _yet_ it was so damn near _impossible_ to keep from fallingâ€|this boy was close, _so, so_ closeâ€|to loving Jack Frost.

And she _knew_ that all the boy needed was just a little _push._

The poor boy, however, seemed to need a lot more than such a sparse explanation. "I-I don'tâ€|"

"Again, it's okay if you don't understand right now." She unceremoniously clapped his back, the teen wincing at the impact. "But you will." And with that, she started for the window, beaming at the sight of MÃ;ni's ethereal glow against the glassy plane. He gazed back to her in seeming silence, a faint promise enduring in the diamond-dotted sky.

A soft-spoken, "A-are you leaving?" ended in her hesitation, fingers hovering over the opening's latch.

Cupid sighed, turning to the boy with a heartening tone reverberating through her words. "Yesâ€¦don't worry. Iâ€¦just need to make things right." And for so many years, _so many times,_ she tried, and tried, and tried again to do _just that_. But this was _different_â€¦she learned her mistakes and she paid the price in toil and miseryâ€¦but this was _different_â€¦because this love was _real_, not a masquerading mimic, not some convoluted creation of a manipulation in _Fate_'s designâ€¦it was _love._ "It may take a whileâ€¦so don't hold your breathâ€¦but be ready."

_The kind of love people ended up searching for and dreaming about their entire lives. _

But it really seemed that the boy was none the wiserâ€¦or at least _very_ skilled in seeming so. "Ready? Ready for _what_?" It was funnyâ€¦what life threw at someoneâ€¦a love that neither boy was expecting and the delightful drama that followed it. He just looked on at her, a trickle of uneasiness following suit as he stood in the exact spot he did three or four weeks ago. "What are you gonna do?"

Ah, what was love without Cupidâ€¦and what was Cupid without her _arrows_? "Literally hunt down that idiot boyfriend of yours, obviouslyâ€¦" she murmured beneath her breath with annoyance; audibly, she brightly exclaimed, "I'm going to beâ€¦paying someone a visit!" Hiccup rolled his eyes as the woman eased the grotesque arachnid into her arms; what's with myths and their lies before leavingâ€¦

But seeing as _this_ _myth_ was about to depart with nothing more to say, he blurted out a desperate, "Wait!" before he could stop himself. The woman turned once more to face him, the night air flooding the bedroom. He withstood the small span of awkwardness as he internally floundered for a good reason to stop her. The best he came up with was: "Now that I answered all your questionsâ€¦_what_ exactly are you?" Because as secretive and impatient as this woman was, she could, at the very _least_, _answer_ him this.

Valencia raised a brow, not even bothering to hide her snicker; she rather liked this boy. "The very embodiment of all your pain, anguish, fears, joy, and affection that you harbor towards Jack Frost." She gave him a sly grin, all too aware that he could only fume at the mirth in her voice and question her sanity upon her words. "It was nice meeting you!" And with a salute, she was goneâ€¦with nothing more than an open window in her stead, moonlight spilling across the floor, and a strange sense of warmth that pervaded the room.

It wasn't the suffocating one, the one that left him gasping for air as invisible smoke stole his breathâ€¦no, this was a friendly warmth, a flicker of fortune, a beaming show of faith he may or may not have absentmindedly placed in the shadow as she took off to other skies in search for something that he may or may not have lost.

Either way, it left Hiccup dazed and thoroughly weary, the weight of her explanation finally sinking into his bones. "W-what?" _Affection? _"What do you think that was all about, Toothlessâ€¦?"

His feline friend was by his side at once, wrapping a tail around his ankle, cheek pressed against the teen's pant leg in a show of comfort

but offering little to no indication of grasping the situation either. Gingerly, the teen plucked the cat from the floor and hefted him into his arms.

Viridian eyes sent a questioning gaze to curious orbs of toxic green before the former decided that no amount of interrogation from the small creature would suffice in ending this headache. "I-Iâ€¦ think I need to lie down," he lamely announced, setting Toothless atop the bed before collapsing right beside him.

He took one last glance at the visible moon, so keen in keeping its secrets while aimless hearts poured theirs to stars galaxies away while the lonely Guardian of the Sky wandered through infinity at leisure, almost as if waiting for the chance to awaken from its enervated spell.

Those were pretty thoughts that narrated through his head, but for Hiccup, the only thing worth voicing as he continued to look out into the radiant night was, "Geezâ€¦ what's with everyone leaving through my windowâ€¦?"

* * *

><p>*= Based on the quote "People _aren't either wicked or noble. They're like chef's salads, with good things and bad things chopped and mixed together in vinaigrette of confusion and conflict_" by Lemony Snicket (Daniel Handler) from _The Grim Grotto_ of _A Series of Unfortunate Events_.

*=Reference to The Three Fates, particularly Atropos, who cuts the strands of fate to end life; Paralleling them are the three deities in this story: Cupid, Fortuna, and Tyche (Love, Fate, and Chance respectively). Chance was mentioned, but not her proper name.

Okayâ€¦uh, so if you didn't understand that: Basically, Hiccup does love Jack. He fell in love him, but, as Fyodor Dostoevsky once wrote, "_To be in love is not the same as loving. You can be in love with a woman and still hate her." _I think for true love, you need to be both in love and be capable of loving that person. Hiccup, whether he knows it or not, is in love, but he can't love Jack in that way because he knows Jack will eventually leave him one day and he's scared to death of being vulnerable.

What Cupid meant is that he does believe in Jack, just as he is in love. But his fear of losing Jack is, paradoxically, what keeps him from seeing and truly believing that Jack will be there for him and love him. Similarly, he can't completely see Cupid because he's not entirely sure _true_ love exists.

There's more to come and more will be explained later.

-collapses-

18. One and Only

Wellâ€¦it's finally here. I'd just like to say thank you all for making writing such a wonderful experience. This story wouldn't be

the same for all the support and encouragement from all of you. So here's to everyone who has stuck by me through this story. I hate to be all sentimental, (though you can probably guess from my writing that I'm that sort of person anyhow haha) but this is the first multi-chaptered story I've ever completed. The feeling of finishing something I've started and love is bittersweet, but it marks things to come. Beginnings and endings are cycles, after all.

****Just Call Me Endy****, I know that I say this time and time again, but I really appreciate all that you do for me and this story. I've enjoyed my time working with you to help this story develop and it would have never gotten this far if it were not for your time, effort, input, and insight. So, once again, thank you, and I mean that from the very bottom of my heart. (See, I told you I'm a sentimental sap)

And for you wonderful readers out there, this is for you and for me. I hope you enjoy.

****Warnings:****Language and Cupid and a religious allusion somewhere there and schmaltzy stuff.

****Disclaimer:**** I own nothing but a laptop and certain plot elements.

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><p>"**But now** abideth faith, hope, love, these three; and the greatest of these is love." 1 Corinthians 13:13

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><p>The season of death had passed, awakening life to bloom from its cold sleep, nature unfurling from its sluggish grasp; it was more than opening one's eyes after darkness for so long, but a cleansing—the purge of revered deeds and silly mistakes, of warm generosity and frigid treachery, of celebrated triumphs and mourned defeats. It reverberated of renewal, a time for old beginnings to lay and rest while new endings burst forth from the blank pages, steady hands running amuck, invigorated, and brimming with life, to take hold of fate's design and paint across the lines with palettes of chance and love—it was a rebirth of old hopes and the budding of dreams as memories soothed the mind of the unknown dangers and wonders to come—beginning, end, all cycles of passing time, twists, turns, swivels, and drops, of rises and downward spirals, and skyrocketing ecstasy

But with the new came the end of the old. Winter melted away, death and white shutting its eyes and falling under an old spell. Amid the clatter, crash, and cataclysm, Winter breathed a sigh. A job well done. A let's meet again. A give me rest for a while. And a dream-devoid darkness erupted, a hibernation in some ways, mere slumber in others.

And so it hid away, dormant as the earth continued with its eternal dance with the galaxy star, falling silent and awaiting the first familiar chills of the passing year

But where did Winter sleep?

It was that thought that led Valencia through a world's journey. Or rather, two weeks of tracking down an elusive spirit without attracting the attention of the other Guardians. Eventually, her tries led her through somewhere and nowhere at the same time. On a map, it would be difficult to point with a confident finger and squinting eyes, but all around her was an echoing white, where winter gripped the earth and refused to cease its hold. It seemed perfect before, a humble abode where the Guardian would bask in his element—only for Cupid to realize later on that the blank shades of snow that stretched for a short infinity resounded with a despairing emptiness.

Her mind clouded with faint regret as she thought back to her command to discontinue the Love-Dwellers' vigilant watch over Jack Frost—it would have made tracking him down _so much simpler_. It was getting annoying and she was getting antsy—and that boy—she was beginning to worry for him as well. Because he was a teenager and he was growing up—perhaps not even love could stop that. But what she did know of love was that separation poisoned the heart. She would need to find Jack quickly—because no doubt, the infuriating Guardian was suffering as well.

And as luck would have it—perhaps the imposing figure approaching her from behind the veil of falling frost may just have been the end her wandering ventures. Straining her eyes, a frown soon marred her face.

Or _not_—that hulking shadow seemed way too big for the Winter Spirit she was after. And so despite centuries of disuse, her fingers instinctively reached for the curved wood of her ancient and iconic weapon, the other deftly plucking a heart-tipped arrow from her quiver with practiced ease. Within a span of heartbeats, she took aim.

But when North's visage entered from the clearing haze with a raised brow and hands up, a show of being unarmed, she lowered her bow and along with it, her hopes. "_Ugh_. Wrong Guardian." It was too difficult to keep the distaste from her voice. So naturally, she didn't even bother to.

There was a sardonic chuckle from the man. "I am sorry to disappoint."

Keen eyes absorbed the sight before her while distractedly running her mouth. "No, it's quite all right. You operate in Winter as well, so I must be getting close, correct?" North was here—that much she could count as a fact. He appeared to her with a gesture of peace and the man was not so underhanded as to ambush her when he gave an unspoken oath of diplomacy. That was something she could at least surmise.

Nevertheless, the Deity saw how his eyes darkened at the vague reference to the Ice Spirit. A deep weariness presided there, and dancing with the shades of age and wonder were the tiniest flecks of guilt. "Cupid—" he started before realizing that perhaps his tone was too formal, the stern warning dissipating into the whiteness of the air. Softly, he tried once more. "_Valencia_—why must you—"

"Because it is my only chance."

He sighed and tried not to look too deeply into the timeless orbs of tumult and burgundy, hardened with determination and desperation after centuries of lunacy and despondency. "Do not be so dramatic." It was much more difficult, however, to ignore the barefaced torture in her voice.

There might've been a faint laugh, lost away by the blustering gales and carried off for more sympathetic ears to catch like hopeless wishes. But when Cupid spoke, she made certain she was heard. "Have you ever had everything you are, everything you worked for, everything you believe inâ€¦just _fade_ away? Gone! Gone like the setting sun while you keep waitingâ€¦waitingâ€¦and waiting for a tomorrow that may never come while the night feasts on your wounds." She watched carefully, beneath the practiced delirium so many had related her with. She was just as cruel and calculating as she had ever been and if insanity is what it took to be heard, to be deemed as a _threat_, then let it be so. "You start _losing_ things, Northâ€¦beginning with _faith_â€¦and then all hope trails behind after it, and then the rest of you followsâ€¦It's _draining_â€¦_exhausting_â€¦and it breaks the _heart_ and _mind_." Because in this forlorn little world of hers filled with cynics and sadists and lies and _madness_, her little truths thrived beneath the rot and decay. It _fed_ from the carnage. She scoffed. "Despite appearances, Nicholasâ€¦I am much older than you and believe me when I say that there is a fine line between _drama_ and _gravity_, just as there is a fine line between you and me: I am not a _Guardian_. I don't _protect_ people." She giggled, a mad little noise splattering on the snow beneath their feet. "I make them fall in _love_." And that was the one truth that neither Time nor Fate could wrench away from her.

The man anticipated for her to be difficult, but yes: beneath her aimless words and arbitrary lapses into whimsical nonsense, she very well managed to strike a few key targets. North tried to reach her once more. "But_ I_ am Guardian. _I_ protect people. And_ I_ am protecting Jack." This time, he dared to peer into twin pools of wine, like small droplets of intoxication personified. Below the frenzy, there was coherencyâ€¦under the unyielding obstinacy, there was understanding. "Valencia, I know you have suffered much from Time, but â€œ"

"Love is suffering, you know that?" And like a light, it was snuffed out, leaving only dull marbles without a spark of their own to mirror North's rising exasperation. "And loveâ€¦love is enduring all that to be with that personâ€¦that _one_."

But the man was patientâ€¦and perhaps she could be persuaded to learn virtue as well. "Will you let me finish?"

And for a moment, it seemed plausible as her eyes widened, almost as if in breaking from a trance. "Iâ€¦apologize," she murmured, as though anticipating an unpleasant conclusion. And not a moment later, she shed the mask of madness, North now gazing at radiant eyes of cherry. "And I apologize for my behavior, but I can't bring myself to be guilty for helping Jack."

There was a sudden shift in her tone, a steeling edge in her voice, storm clouds cleared from her path, no longer muffled by the whispering breezes of dying flowers and monstrous romance. _This

_Cupidâ€|this was the woman Aster had once warned ofâ€|once feared. But Nicholas St. North did not raise his voice. He would not be overcome by _this _Cupid or a thousand others. "_Helping?" He almost chuckled at the absurdity of it all. "Is that what you call nearly destroying his _happiness?"

"No, that's you and the other Guardians," her words were searing and slicing all at once. North didn't flinch, but something within him threatened to splinter at the memory of the mute agony in a certain Frost Spirit's eyes, a deafening misery in his silence that only seemed to grow with every passing day as eyes of blue gazed up at the immortal sky, mind and heart caught in visions of what once was and what could never be. The man was thankfully pulled from his thoughts as an enraged cry broke through the stillness of the scene. "Why can't you see that being with that boy makes him _happy?_ That _love_ brings the greatest _pain_ and the greatest _joy?"

But North held his ground. "I know what love is capable of." And the visions of fake smiles and hollow laughs blanketing deep wounds flooded his thoughts. "Just because I am not as old does not mean that I am ignorant of its ways." The Guardian of Wonder closed his eyes and willed them away.

Cupid scoffed. "You say this but you are ignorant of what you all have done." The smile on her lips was not kind; it did not speak of pleasantries and courteous contentment. "I've seen what love can do at its best and its worst. At its best, he found no greater joy than from just being together with him. At its best, each and every word and touch they shared was cherished. At its best, the scars wreaked by solitude were slowly soothed away. At its bestâ€|he could _almost _believeâ€|that love is a wonderful, _beautiful _thing." And a moment later, North saw exactly what was behind the cruel curl of her lips as the gesture contorted to a vicious snarl eyes alight with ferocity. "But because of _youâ€|it's _not_. Instead, he lives love at its worst. At its worst, he has suffered more than he has at the hands of fear. At its worst, he has felt more _lost _and _alone_ than he has ever been. At its worst, he grieves for something he believed he could never have. At its worstâ€|" And she took a shaky breath, flames surging through her veins, escaping as nothing more than fog floating off to winter's holdâ€| "At its worst, I see nowâ€|just how _in love_ he isâ€|"

â€|and the fog was captured by its Spirit. "Good to know you've been paying attention all this time."

The pair stiffened, one from alarm, the other from annoyance. Haunting eyes of unforgiving ice lingered to North's wide-eyed _dread_ as he descended from an indiscernible plane between sky and land. Jack swallowed the screams, the yells, the accusations and the blame, letting it feed the thirsty embers.

"I don't know what disturbs me moreâ€|"the fact that a complete _stranger_ has accused my _friends_â€|ofâ€|"_hurting_ me?" His voice choked, gasping as though inhaling smoke, eyes beginning to tear as though the fire he swallowed began to burn him alive. "Of _destroying my happiness?" And then those eyes were to Cupid, this _horrid_ Personification of Love. "Orâ€|the fact that I'm starting to believe herâ€|"

"Jackâ€|" North approached the boy, starting when the volatile spirit

flinched and jumped back.

It was easier to calm his thoughts, soothe his mind though it now felt as though he had just endured hurricanes of _inferno_ and _rime_, thoughts unsteady and focus slipping away, he took a breath to cure his clarity and allowed it all to click into place.

He turned to them, expression numb. "You knowâ€¦funny thingâ€¦" Hiccup told me he _fell_ _asleep_ doing his homework." A bitter laugh resonated and crushed the facade, its sound settling deep into the heavy heart of the Guardian of Wonder. "You know, the guy'll stay up till the crack of dawn to get his work done and he _still_ goes to schoolâ€¦" sometimes with less than a couple of hours of sleepâ€¦and you know, not _once_ has he ever fallen asleep in class." He gasped, an absurd chuckle threatening to escape, but he feared if he let it, the wretched thing would turn into a sob a split-second later. "And yeah, I would knowâ€¦" I'd ask him if he did after nights like those, but he says he _can't_ because if something's on his mind, if there's something he _needs to do_, heâ€¦" But there was no stopping it; this one was tricky, masquerading as a gulp of breath only for him to find tears trickling down slowly, the droplets hot like liquid fire. "It was _Sandy_â€¦wasn't it?" The sound was that of a desperate plea, but asking for truth or lie, neither of the other two knew.

North stumbled for the right words. "Iâ€¦"

"At the park when I was with Jamie and Sophie and that incident in by the TV shopâ€¦" Bunny, right?" he demanded, voice crumbling with its volume.

"Well, TV shop was mostly Toothâ€¦"

"Ohâ€¦" oh, that's just _fantastic_." Despite being the embodiment of Winter and frost, he learned quite well how to utilize a scathing and scalding retort. He was vaguely aware he was hyperventilating, thoughts once more jumbled and calamitous as they swirled through his mind. Tiredly, almost as though dreading the response, he evened his breath and gave North a hard glare. "And _you_? What did you pull?"

It seemed that _this_ Guardian was a bit more effective at interrogations; North seemed utterly trapped, so to be generous, Valencia stepped forward: "An unsuccessful confrontation with meâ€¦so I may stop interfering with their interventions." Cupid sighed and bit back her own little reprisal of '_You're welcome for the scarf, by the way._'

When Jack turned to the Deity of Love, the very root of this _damn_ ache in his heart and the tangles in his mind, he obviously did not look to her with reverenceâ€¦ or fear, or disgust. Only with indictment, blame, and disappointment, imploring, "Then _why'd_ you _let_ them!"

It was disgusting, truly and utterly, how her heart clenched with this _damn_ _awful_ feelingâ€¦the feeling of knowing that at the very core of _love_, it was _suffering_. "Becauseâ€¦" The flames were doused, ire simmering away as she gazed at the despair in those eyesâ€¦the same despair mirroring those in viridian hues. "You _gave_ _up_," she gasped with hurt. "You justâ€¦ran away." She damned herself for letting sorrow bleed into her voice, but she would _not_ let him

forget what he had done: "You didn't just leave him _behind_â€|you left him _alone_."

Because while love was suffering, it was not the only one to blame.

There might've been a flare of delight that lit up inside her as the boy's eyes rounded with _horror, guilt_â€|_realization_. It made it easy to grab him, a fistful of his jacket to bring him to her level, _red_ bleeding into her irises at the terror he exuded. And such a sadistic reaction to it all was simply because: "In all my years of working in this _miserable_ businessâ€|I've never wanted to _throttle_ anyone more than _you_ for choosing this path." She released him with a forceful shove, sickened by her loss of control.

And just like the rest, they retaliated with all sorts of _pitiful_ excuses. "It's not like I had any other choiceâ€"

"You could have _told him_ how you _felt_!" Because why, _why_ was that never a good enough option? "â€|how you _feel_," she silently amended. Why was itâ€|that so many people squandered away their short lives out of these little fears that their minds concocted when the _truth_, the plain, sweet, simple _truth_ stood before them. Something Valencia once thought long dead fragmented within her, the tiniest of shards tearing this _truth_ from her grasp. "You may not have had forever with himâ€|but you might have gone and thrown away what _little_ you had leftâ€|"

Dread tightened in Jack's stomach, breath stolen from his body as the fire within him was smothered by an arctic storm. "Whatâ€|what do you mean?"

Her eyes widened, shock rendering her blood frozen in her veins. "You mean you haven'tâ€|" Not a second later, a hateful laugh nearly leapt from her lips, but she muted the malice, suffocated the spite, and let the worst of it pool in her words, saturating each syllable with malevolence. "Tell him, Nick. Go ahead." Against herself, she felt her lips quirk to a grimace. "Tell him that children lose a lot more than _innocence_ when they grow up."

She detected it thenâ€"the pervading aroma of _fear_. Icy blues found those of dismal, grey orbs, his mouth breathing out, "_North_â€|" as if too afraid to say anything else.

There was a deep anguish in the man's eyes, unknowingly prompting something vexing and worrisome in Cupid's chest. She wondered if this was _guilt_.

For a moment, the Guardian of Wonder floundered helplessly for an escapeâ€"but he knew the moment he saw the agony on his friend's face, Cupid left him with no choice; Jack had had enoughâ€|and he deserved the truth. "Whenâ€|childrenâ€|reach certain time in lifeâ€|theyâ€|" He sought the right words to say, anything to ease the blow, to soften the impact, to find some way, _any way_, to keep despair from taking his friendâ€|but with those pleading eyes, North knew that sugared lies would only lay salt on the wounds. He breathed out the best he could give him: "They stop believing, Jack. They stop seeing magic in this worldâ€|they forget usâ€|and they grow up."

"You meanâ€¦" This time, there was no point stopping the tears. Not whenâ€¦all alongâ€¦after _everything_â€¦ "Heâ€¦Iâ€¦"

It broke his heart to see their youngest suffering. North stepped forward, reaching out to the boy. "We were trying to protect you, Jackâ€¦"had this boy stopped believing, youâ€¦"

It surprised no one when he pulled away. "Noâ€¦no need to explain. I get it. I get why you did it. _I get it_â€¦" It was surprising how muchâ€¦_hurt_ the heart endured. But here Jack was, all in one pieceâ€¦while the remains of that accursed, still-and-feeblely beating organ laid in shards and tatters. "_God_â€¦it really was doomed from the _start_, wasn't it?" Eyes cast to where he or anybody may be, a cry flew from his mouth so that maybeâ€¦maybe someone, anyone would hear the melody of heartbreakâ€¦and just maybeâ€¦"_God_, that's soâ€¦unfairâ€¦" but it was too much to _hope_, wasn't it? Too much to believe, too much to wish because behind those pretty little words, those deceitful emotions that injured and scarred while making him believe it was _wonderful_, _and something _beautiful_ when all alongâ€¦ But then his eyes were fixed on _her_. "So then, why are _you_ here?"

Was this punishment? Was he to redeem himself? Was he to bare his wrongs to herâ€¦before she stated her judgment? A Deity of Love, bow and arrow ready, aimed to strike his heart to suffer anguish at her hand evermoreâ€¦what could she _possibly_ _want_?

But wickedness had gone, the blare and blaze in her eyes scattering, only leaving divested reflections of her own misfortune, of her own misgivings, of her own agony. But she gazed back at him, a being more than familiar with the heart's afflictions, of hope lost, and of faith brokenâ€¦a mastery over eternity's torment. "If you had one chance, if you had one hope, if you could be with himâ€¦even for just a _day_â€¦wouldn't you take it?" Her voice did not tremble, her tone clear and imposing, focused solely on the Guardian of Winter. "You frustrate me, boy. Your heart _claims_ to love him, your heart _claims_ to be devoted to him, your heart _claims_ that he is _the one_â€¦yet you _flee_ like a _coward_."

"_Wha_â€¦" She first _defended_ him, then _blamed_ him, and now she was _mocking_ him? "_You just went on a whole rant about me loving Hiccup!" He tried to meet her eyes, but the feat itself was slowly starting to become more and more difficult with its glower of pure rage at his defiance. "How can _you_ claim that I'm not sure?!"

"Are you referring to what I said earlier, before you made your presence known?" She laughed, cruel and frightening at his hesitant nod. "Don't get so cocky, _brat_," the woman hissed, eyes flaring like an elder star's last breath. "I wasn't talking about _you_."

All at once, Jack felt his heart stop beating, lungs sputter a breath, voice struggle, and mind blank. Because she couldn't be implying thatâ€¦couldn't be _saying_ thatâ€¦couldn't just _give_ him hope _like_ that and _expect_ him to _believe_ that after _all_ this time_, after _everything_ he now knew, how could she just up and tell him the very thing he had been _wishing_ and _dreading_ to hear: that "H-heâ€¦heâ€¦"

"Loves you," she ended, hammering the last nail to his heart's

coffin. "The same way you love himâ€|if not more." She scowled, vehemence acidic on her tongue as she spat, "And youâ€|_left_ him."

Between the two, North gaped, turmoil crashing and clamoring as his thoughts sought to arrange themselves. "Youâ€|did not know he loved you?"

Jack staggered. "_Knew_? Of course not! Heâ€|he's never even _seen_ meâ€|" It was a confusing emotion, a noxious mix of grief and awe, the fiery weight in his chest combating with the fluttering warmth in his stomach. "He loves meâ€|" Jack tasted the words on his tongue, foreign and mystifying, too good to be true and a cursed blessing all at once. "Heâ€|_loves_ meâ€|" The beginnings of a pained smile painted his lips.

Cupid sighed. "Not completely, no. He himself hasn't admitted the fact out loudâ€|but it's there. I've seen him and I see it." With a heartless shrug, she continued, "Either way, you don't need _eyes_ to _love_."

Jack wasn't sure how much more he could takeâ€|how much more his heart could bear. "_What_?" he gasped. There was a dizzying sensation, the feeling of tumbling, falling, Icarus helplessly holding on to false wings and fleeing feathers as his body plummeted to the ground, down, down, down, waiting for the crashâ€|"H-how're you so _sure_ then?" _Again_â€|love was a falsehearted, innocent monster.

"Well if it makes you feel any better, heâ€|caught a glimpse of your eyes," Valencia recited plainly, almost as if unaware of the blatant effect her words inflicted on the Guardians; still, the slight falter in her words spoke otherwise. Seeing as the boy's eyes were nearly popping right out of his skull, she quirked a brow. "Hmphâ€|he was right. They are blue like glaciers under the arctic sun."

Had Jack been any less of a man, he would have collapsed. Wellâ€|if he had been any less of a manâ€|and if he weren't currently using his staff to hold him upright. "Heâ€|_saw_ me_."

"Heâ€|_saw_ you," North repeated as though entranced by those very words, those very words evoking something in his ancient mindâ€|"a faraway thought dancing just ways out of his reach, of Christmas Eves and the bouncing of soft chimesâ€|

Cupid sighed, externally bored with what had already been discussed and internally very pleased to see the importance of her little finding. "Yesâ€|I'm not sure how, but you gave him something to believe in. He gained something others his age should have lostâ€|" There might've been a small trace of an honest smile at thatâ€|

â€|but it was dashed as she nearly jumped from a certain Guardian's enthusiasm. "Soâ€|I _WAS RIGHT_!" North boomed, eyes wide with wonder as the Guardian of Wonder pumped a fist into the air, drawing more than just startled looks from his companions.

Jack cast Valencia a bewildered glance, the woman returning it with a confused motion, before a swift "_What_?" from the Winter Spirit was uttered.

"About you and J        , of course!"* North beamed, excitement stirring the air around him as an astounded tenderness gleamed in his eyes from a memory only his thoughts could relive. He stroked his beard, wide smile receding to an impressed grin. "This boy of yours     is quite a little wonder     I never would have thought     to see another."*

Jack gulped, unsure whether it was dread or hope budding at the pit of his stomach. "Wait, what do you mean     '_another'_?"

The man stammered for a second before gulping down his guilt. "I     I am sorry. I did not say before     because I did not want to give false hope." He took a breath, nostalgia flowing to his words as he began his tale. It sung clearly now, after all this time, of denying the existence of another child like him, its persistent song rang     clear as Christmas bells. "Many years ago     a little boy was chosen to receive first gift of Christmas that year. He asked     he asked for a bell     bell from my sleigh." As he continued, a fond smile lit up his face, eyes resonating with delicate joviality. "Only children who believe can hear its beautiful sound     and when they do not believe    " North restrained his voice; it wouldn't do well at all to have his words tremble. "It falls silent. But this boy     this wonderful little boy     even as Christmases passed, even as he grew old    "

"The bell kept ringing for him     he never stopped believing    " Valencia murmured, eyes seeming to look out into nothing at all; she couldn't read minds or see into the past     but North wouldn't build this story up for nothing.

The man scowled in distaste. "Will anyone let me finish?"

And suddenly, the woman stomped towards him as the shrill echo of, "And you kept this to yourself?!" caused the two males flinch.

The Guardian of Wonder stumbled a few steps back; William Congreve did not lie when he stated 'Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.' "I did not know boy was starting to believe! I     we thought he was losing    "

Valencia jabbed a finger to North's beard-concealed chest. "Don't you know this would have made things so much simpler had you    "

"But even now     you're not sure," Jack insisted. The squabbling ceased and both pairs of eyes were trained on Jack, the Winter Guardian still too unwilling to risk heartbreak once again     "You're not sure he'll     be able to see me after all." Still too unwilling to chance losing Hiccup twice. "Or     if he'll stop being able to see me in the future."

North's face softened. Yes, love was the heart's gamble     too much at stake for such small chances. "Jack     all I    " He took a critical glance at Cupid before smiling lightly when she returned his gaze. "All we want for you     is to be happy    " He placed a comforting hand on his shoulder, expression firm when the Ice Spirit finally met his eyes. "I will not lie: you are correct. Just because boy might be able to see you     does not mean he will. Nor does it mean he will always see you, always believe." And when the boy began to deflate again, North gave him a pat of encouragement. "But it is your choice

if you want to take leap of faith and _be_ with this boy. But always know that hearts heal, time stops for no oneâ€|and we are here for you." Becauseâ€|if this boy was like the one from so many years agoâ€|then what North knew of _chances_ was right: the odds did not affect the individual outcome. And when the smallest flickers of hope returned to those ice-blue eyes, North sent a meaningful look to Valencia. "I am sorry it took long time for me to see that."

"Sudden change of heart?" Cupid taunted.

"Wellâ€|now that Jack has fighting chanceâ€|" The man chuckled, giving one last affectionate clap to the Ice Spirit's shoulder. Andâ€|maybe he _did_ believe there was a chance from the very beginningâ€|just a little.

Jack nodded, tearing his gaze away from North's warm eyes to the cold and cutting irises of Love Personified, her stare impassive beyond the callousness.

What was the cost of love, he wanted to ask. A heart's torment and the soul's shatter, years spent crawling forward day by day to dull the ache, a hallowed despair, a hollow ecstasy of having _tried_, his own creations of unforgiving winters and arctic rime, searing cold and furious blizzards, endless nights and freezing gales turned against him, hurling him down, down, down slippery slopes paved with frost and ice towards the frozen thresholds of his, the Winter Harbinger's, own frigid, broken heart? Was that his gamble?

And yet, what of its gains? To this, there was a wordless answer written in reveries: time flowing slower in calm rivulets rather than cruel torrents, the sun shining a little bit brighter, _warmth_ and _love_ filling the winter season, losing himself in the days to come with Hiccup by his side; the image of them together, his heartbeat thudding softly, the serenity about them soothing and lulling akin to the pull of the tide; even in his mind, it felt _right_, beautiful in its simplicity and so very precious in a world composed of doubts and mistakes, but by being there next to this teen, Hiccup, who held the promise of healing centuries of loneliness or irrevocably breaking himâ€|and then all the world was narrowed down to this one threadbare fact:

Jack was in love with him. And that was enough to make his decision.

But from another's eyes, all the woman did was shrug, a ghost of a smile lingering on her lips as though she knew the Frost Spirit's choice from the very start. "Well, you heard the man. It's in your hands now, Frosty."

He smiled to her, hopeful and grateful all at once. "â€|Thank youâ€|"

And in his stead were a few delicate flakes of frost descending from the sky, winter winds carrying him off, a bird of paradise soaring above impossibilities, and the pair below _prayed_ his wings were strong enough to keep him from crashing down, bruised and beaten, from adamant realities.

After a short moment, Nicholas St. North sighed. "Wellâ€|that went better than expected." He howled a jolly laugh and turned to the

contemplating Deity beside him, grin amiable and generous. "Now, would you like to accompany me to the Pole?"

Cupid blinked before eyeing him with hesitance in her voice. "What for?"

There was a booming chuckle at her blatant suspicion. "What? Are you telling me you are going to miss big confession?" He grinned at her stunned reaction. "I believe we are accomplices now."

Valencia in turn startled North with a giggle not a second laterâ€”dulcet and lively like the gentle ring of bells. "Wouldn't miss it for the world." Because she wished to see what was there and what could be; she wished she could see dreams come to life and see love as a wonderful and beautiful thing where even a moment of that happiness was worth a lifetime of solitude and heartbreak.

The man smiled at her, feeling quite fortunate to witness such a genuine display of pleasantry from the woman, a rarity if anything, something unseen for a good few centuries. "Good. Now, help me find where I parked the sleighâ€”|"

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Most of his initial bursts of candied hopes and eagerness were voraciously devoured by ravenous dread as the miles between him and where his heart laid diminished. But the Winter Spirit would forgo the mounting terror as he skated across fragments of earth enclosed by tireless tides, colors of cities and landscapes falling away as though spring were merely a dream, his thoughts lying in disjointed expectations and patchwork expectancies.

It was maddening, the very thought of what could come, what may not be, and what could be lost within the silent dash towards untold beginnings or enigmatic ends, the blossoming of cynicism draining away what little confidence he had to begin withâ€”confidence that he would remain unscathed by what was to comeâ€”still, the confidence of reuniting with Hiccup, no matter what the result remained intact. Because he loved him and _love_ left no room for doubt. _That_ was at least something for Jack to cling to as he rode through the air; focusing on that alone, he kindled a sense of renewed ambition, the thrill surging through his veins.

Because as much as he would hate to admit to the Easter Kangaroo, he needed this hope: hope that after today, that happiness wouldn't just be another taunt, a reprimand for his own cowardice; hope that today everything would be all right and he wouldn't have to wait for little idle moments to help him forget that cold and empty spot within him that he didn't want anyone to see ever since _that night_; hope that today he wouldn't sink anymore because by then, he'd be safe, safe from the frigid loneliness, safe from the suffocating melancholy that gripped him like a vice, safe from the fear of never knowing and the fear of crawling out of that sinking feeling only to come crashing down like atom bombs, safe in the arms of the _one_ heâ€”

Loves.

It had such a pretty ring to it. _Love_. And Hiccup was _his love_. That sounded even better.

So it was with little doubt and burgeoning optimism that Jack tumbled into Burgess's familiar atmosphere, through the familiar streets and woods, through the familiar neighborhoods, and to the familiar streets—and eventually to Hiccup's familiar bedroom, glad for the teen's tendency to let gentle breezes and fresh air immerse his private space through an opened window during the day (and subsequently, permitting myths and legends to enter his abode as well).

Without surveying the room, the booming call of "Hiccup!" left his lips before he could stop himself, a giddy sensation bubbling forth at returning to where he called home for the last few weeks. And at the sight of the unmistakable head of auburn hunched over his study table, strands seeming to glow red at the fringes from his lamp-light, Jack felt his spirits soar. "Hiccup, I'm here! Hiccup Iâ€" But it was short-livedâ€"Didn't he hear me? I'm right here! Why isn't he answering? â€" natural disasters set in motion, turbulent and devastating as a vacant reply resonated. "I'm backâ€" he tried again, frantically trying to keep desperation out of his voice.

But the teen seemed to have not heard him, fastidiously working at his desk; books cluttered around him and though it was Sunday morning, Monday classes loomed far too near for the studious brunet to simply abandon his work. It was methodical, almost soothing in its monotonous logic, its simple and irrefutable truths.

Jack gave an uneasy laugh. "Hiccupâ€"c'monâ€"I-I know I've beenâ€"a huge jerk forâ€"not visiting, but youâ€" He trailed off, despair and quiet agony stealing his voice.

Ever-so-slightly that Jack couldn't catch the action, Hiccup's hand faltered during an equation, the only evidence of it visible in the slight squiggle left by his pencil on the lined paper. It was calming, the reasoning behind it all, one question after another, one fact that could not be changed. Stagnant.

The room was spinning now, a noisy and deafening silence sticking to the walls and suffocating the Winter Spirit as he fought for breath. "Hiccupâ€"Hiccup! Iâ€" "

As though he felt a chill in the air, a slight stirring of melancholy drafting through the atmosphere, the teen stood up, grumbling as he approached the empty window, eyes never meeting where a storybook myth stood in heartbreak and agony. "I really need to get a better lockâ€" His fingers hovered over the latch for a moment before leaving it be, the glass's reflection capturing just the faintest lapse of desolation from his doggedly impassive eyes.

For Jack, seeing those viridian eyes look right past him, indifferent and aloof, unknowing, unseeing of his presence entirely almost became too much. "Butâ€"it's notâ€" And he wanted to say possibleâ€"but the reality of it was that it was possibleâ€"far more possible than the teen miraculously being able to see himâ€"being able to love him, so who was he fooling? So instead, what gasped out of his mouth was, "fairâ€"It's not fairâ€" He felt it then, as he pleaded, "Would you look at me?" The small cracks tracing along his heart, elaborate, destructive designsâ€" "Ifâ€"if you can't see meâ€" â€" love's sadistic mark. How could

he have trusted her in the first place? When she herself was the embodiment of this horrible, dreadful, awful thing that slowly ripped his heart to pieces. "If you can't hear meâ€|"

The teen turned, eyes focused solely on the piles of paper littering his desk before calmly striding to the chair and sitting down, pencil in hand, and resuming where he left off. One problem after anotherâ€¦

"Y-youâ€¦you've stopped believing in meâ€¦" Jack whispered, accusation and anguish scorching his throat. "Youâ€¦_gave up_â€¦"

It wasn't tiredness causing Hiccup's eyes to sting. It also seemed that blinking rapidly did nothing to alleviate it one bitâ€"nor did it ease the melancholy blossoming in his chest.

It was getting harder to draw breath without the harsh prick of ugly thorns mangling Jack's chest, every heartbeat another casualty to his aching heart. Because this was what it came toâ€"this was what was left. "â€|Fineâ€|okay, _fine_. I get itâ€|" And it didn't matter if he cried, if he didn't say anything at all, didn't matter if Hiccup _did_ miss him, didn't matter if the teen could no longer remember his nameâ€""Too late, huh?" â€" no longer able to remember days and nights spent by his side, every laugh, every smile, every joke, every touch, every memory eroded to nothing more than silent musings of something irreversibly _lost_ to ponder on during cold winter days. Jack snorted, ignoring the gross sound of a sob mingling with the action. Hiccup definitely got the better end of the deal. "Looks like North and Val were wrongâ€|" Because Hiccup had forgotten. "Looks like I was wrongâ€|" But Jack _never_ would.

Fractional exponents were a pain—but that didn't quite explain why there was a small dot of water staining the numbers of the page, consequently joined with another—and another. Hiccup bit his lip, but this time, it wasn't a sigh of boredom that he muffled.

Jack tried to give his blind eyes a smile, a bitter one at best, but he feared that if he forced it more than he already did, then it would no doubt break under the conflicting tension. "Wellâ€¦Iâ€¦just came by to tell you that Iâ€¦" '_love youâ€¦|_' "â€¦Well it doesn't matter now." And even then, in the end, he was a coward after allâ€¦"those three simple words never reaching his own ears, forever laying dormant, dying, desperate for his voice to breathe them life and meaning, but far too fearful of deaf ears and cruel silence would inevitably follow. "So insteadâ€¦good luck, wherever life takes you." And if he thought he felt pain before, loneliness, and agony, he was dead wrong. "Just know thatâ€¦I won't forget youâ€¦|" Because nothing hurt quite like this. "Like you forgot meâ€¦|"

It was just a few steps away from the window, where he left days before, but this time, the small strides it took to reach the escape of open skies felt like earthquakes crumbling his heart to oblivion. When he reached where glass painted the blues of April morning and unsympathetic clouds lazily drifted by, a familiar weight in his jacket pocket made itself known.

Jack took out the small, stuffed bear, a single finger grazing its sewn face as Jãñkul apathetically stared back. And in those owlsh black-button eyes, Jack almost _swore_ he witnessed a deep, resounding despair, the bear's sewn expression pensive and doleful.

And just because Jack knew he could no longer do so for Hiccup, he squeezed the bear into a hug; the moment the soft cotton met his chest, Jack nearly doubled over in agony.

Burning; this feeling was burning him alive. It burned like hellfire and burned like glaciations eating him raw. "Hiccupâ€¦turn around? I know you can't hear meâ€¦but just let me see you? One last timeâ€¦?" Because _dear God, it hurt_, but he needed this, needed to see one final look at those perfect green eyes, his freckled cheeks before he was gone, gone from his life forever, just winter's memory perfectly preserved in ice and dreams, a dream that may or may not have happened at all to the teen, and _dear God it was unfair _because Hiccup wasn't listening, Hiccup couldn't listen, even as he begged again and again, "Hiccup, just _pleâ€¦"_

"I heard you the first time." It seemed Fate liked proving him wrong.

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Cupid' narrowed her eyes. "Soâ€¦let me get this straightâ€¦you have a cameraâ€¦that has a direct view of Hamish's bedroom window."

"In HD!" North added with a jolly laugh.

"In HDâ€¦" she parroted with a raised brow.

"I also had speakers installed with it some time ago," he enlightened as the pair made their way through the Pole and into the surveillance room.

Cupid ignored how surreal this all felt, especially when more than a few Yetis turned their heads, merely grunted, and resumed their work. She also ignored the rather interesting display of countless monitors throughout the darkened room. The woman sighed, keeping her concentration close to the situation at hand. "Well okay, then. I'm sure as Santa Clause, you have some very good reasons for peeping into children's bedrooms."

"They are to see if children are naughty or nice!" the man defended as Phil directed them to a blank screen while others readied the apparatus.

Valencia opened her mouth and promptly shut it. She then tried again a few seconds later. "â€¦I'm not sure how that would stand in a court of lawâ€¦"

North made it a point to ignore her. "Ahâ€¦the feed is coming in now!" There was a crackle of static before images formed and colors sharpened on the screen; though the woman outwardly displayed indifference, she couldn't help but feel a bit awed by its efficiency and she couldn't deny how something within her ached at the anticipation.

Though, unfortunately, those sentiments were nearly dashed as a clamor resonated through the spacious room, more than a few of North's workers startled right out of their seats. However, it was the demanding bellow of, "_Hold it righ' there_!" that had the woman dismayed at the shrinking possibility of actually getting to _enjoy_ the fruits of her labor.

Cupid felt her shoulders slump, a weariness blanketing her previous qualms. "Augh, why now?" It didn't surprise her one bit to find Tooth, Bunny, and Sandy at the doorway, two-thirds of the party stunned at the Guardian of Wonder's act of treason for harboring an enemy, and one person positively seething at the sight of her.

Toothiana flew down, eyes bright with hurt. "North! What? what are you doing?"

The large man seemed to shift awkwardly for a few moments. "Ah, Tooth, Bunny, Sandy!" And seeing as all eyes were focused on him and not the monitor behind his large frame, the Guardian of Wonder nonchalantly leaned to the side in an effort to hide the events displayed. "Eh? surprise?"

Bunny stomped over to him, boomerang raised. "You turnin' traitor on us, North? You were supposed ta talk her outta this! Not bring her to the Pole for milk n' cookies!" And then the wooden weapon was directed at the stoic Deity. "And you haven't I told you to stop this nonsense?! We know you're up ta no good."

Valencia's glare hardened. "This nonsense is my job."

He gave a caustic laugh at that. "Hah! That's rich comin' from you." Bunny lowered his arm, stance remaining defensive as he spied the familiar arch of wood on her back, but the fire blazing in his eyes accepted no fear to overwhelm his senses; she hadn't used Eros for centuries and likewise, the bow had remained unresponsive to her call. He had nothing to worry about—"instead, it was that of roiling rage and mislaid blame that simmered in his voice. "Look what you do when you interfere—"don' ya see how much grief you've caused?"

"People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones," she replied, eyes lustrous with vehemence.

He expected that; nonetheless, he flinched at the impact of her words. "It's for tha best and you know that! Should Jack know?"

"Oh, he already does. He doesn't care. He's off to see the boy right now," she carelessly informed, her bored words clashing with how her eyes gleamed with wicked triumph and Bunny felt like he could kill her right there.

And before Aster could retort and, most likely, lunge at the woman with unbridled ferocity, this one sentence halted all that in an instant: "He is there with the boy right now?" North mumbled, giving a furtive glance to the screen.

Her lips curled to a devious grin, malevolence dancing in the light of her eyes. "Oh, marvelous—I'm just in time for the confession—" Her fingers found the projectile weapon once more, sensing perhaps the faintest pulsations of her sleeping ace.

Bunny's eyes rounded with horror. "Cupid—" He willed himself to move after the momentary stun, approaching her with hesitance. "Y-you—you wouldn't dare." Forcing Eros to comply only wrought

disaster.

"What is she doing? Bunny?" Toothiana drew closer while Sandy looked on with quiet concentration, Dreamsand flowing wildly around him. It was _their_ _fight_ until now.

"_Back_ _away_!" They froze as Valencia, in one fluid motion, drew an arrow. "Nowâ€¦I've messed up. I won't deny that. I've messed upâ€¦trying to use _fate_ to my advantageâ€¦I've tried to _bind_ people together only to bring them misery and heartbreakâ€¦" And if questioned later, she would no doubt _refuse_ to admit to the prickling sensation behind her eyes and how everything started getting blurry before she blinked and felt small beads of water drip down her cheeks. "And these arrows have done their fair share of chaos and catastropheâ€¦" With a shake of her head, her thoughts rid themselves of past mistakes, her lessons well learned. "But nowâ€¦these are on _my_ termsâ€¦_fate_, _chance_â€¦this isn't about that nowâ€¦this is about _love_."

Toothiana gasped, wings beating furiously towards her, provocation already in place. "Cupid, _please_! Don't do this!"

Valencia took deadly aim at her heart. "Any closer and I'll fire." Madness shone in her eyes once more, a grim reminder of love's true nature. "Do you think I'm joking? Just remember: office romances _never_ end well."

Despite what it may bring, despite what chaos may come, despite the terror that sunk beneath his skin at the crazed look in his old partner's eyes, Aster took a bold step forward, defiance meeting swirling shades of lunacy. "You wouldn't _dare_."

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Jack felt his breath catch, his knees nearly buckling beneath him. "W-whaâ€¦"

Hiccup sighed and swiveled in his chair to face him, mouth trembling as he discreetly rubbed his eyes. "Iâ€¦didn't hear a 'please.'"

And Jack felt like his heart would give out from utter joy, seeing him, seeing _Hiccup_, and knowing that it all could have been lostâ€¦it could have all beenâ€¦ "Y-_you_â€¦"

There was a defeated smile on the teen's lips, breaking for just a second to let out a weak, "Hey, Jackâ€¦"

It really was a shame that the small burst of happiness was quickly overwhelmed by a cloud of grievous frustration. "What the _hell_ was that for?!" Because Jack had never felt so _fucking_ _scared_ in his life.

And so went the brilliant reunion; Hiccup rolled his eyes, lips curling to a scowl. "Well I guess you know how it feels, huh? To be _ignored_ this whole time?" the teen rebuked, all traces of a smile gone from his face.

"What?" Jack really tried not to be intimidated when Hiccup stood up and advanced towards him.

The brunet sighed and Jack tried to overlook how his chest clenched at the sight of tears gathering at the corner of those glimmering green eyes. "I know you came by to see Jamie and Sophie and I _know_ you've been _avoiding_ me ever since you left."

It wasn't just the shame that injured him, but again, he'd try to ignore it. "But thaâ€"that was just plain _cruel_" Jack also tried to ignore the burning of his own eyes, choking as a dry sob clawed its way out of his throat at the _horrible_ mistake he _almost_ madeâ€|_again_. "You _asshole_! Iâ€"I seriously thought you stopped _believing_ in me!" He was definitely crying now; those tears weren't stopping for a while. At least they were of relief more than anger.

"_Me_" Oh great; Hiccup was starting to cry now too, though Jack would guess more from anger. "What makes you _think_ I'd forget about you in _six_ weeks!" The teen huffed, swiftly wiping the telltale droplets away. "Well _that_ definitely shows how much _faith_ you have in meâ€|"

Mirroring his actions, Jack sputtered as he doused his sleeve. "I-Iâ€|no, it's not that! It'sâ€"!"

"_'It's'_ _what_" the teen spat. "What have you been hiding? No one just leaves right out of the blueâ€|and doesn't visit when they say they wouldâ€|and just barge in here _through my window_ and actâ€"act like all that never happened unlessâ€" "

To stop the irritating and painful tirade, Jack blurted the first thing that popped into his head: "_I never wanted to_" The _truth_ that he should have said all along.

Startled more than pacified, the teen could only take a deep breath and at least try to collect himself; Hiccup never yelled, he never got into arguments like this and now was not the time to start. "Never wanted to _what_" He needed to understand, needed to push the hurt aside for now; Jack was explaining and this was a definite first because the guy was always so _damn_ dodgy with everything he said. And just because Jack had the infuriating tendency to make him actâ€|so uncharacteristically, that didn't mean that he couldn't pull himself together.

All that flew out the proverbial window once Winter whispered, "_To_ _leave_ _you_â€|"

Hiccup found the soft disclosure to evoke the _coldest_ sensation he had ever endured from the death season's icy grasp; it hurt like frost settling into his bones, freezing his blood, and lulling his heart to fatal sleep, howling blizzards and unforgiving tempests storming through his thoughts. Unconsciously, he pulled his scarf tighter around him, trying to recover precious warmth when he finally uttered, "_Then why did you?"_ Because if that was the truthâ€|then why did the facts say otherwise?

"Becauseâ€"!" And he couldn't lieâ€"couldn't keep hurting him, couldn't stand seeing those green eyes well up with tears too stubborn to fall until he damn near broke, couldn't keep wishing there was some other way to just be happy and ignore all the cruel truths in the world. "Becauseâ€|I was scaredâ€|I was scared because you were growing upâ€|I was scared that we were losing what we

hadâ€|I was scared you didn't _need_ me thereâ€|didn't _want_ me thereâ€|" And he knew it was a pathetic excuse; he knew that he had been foolish to delude himself into thinking that there was any other way than this. Because Time stopped for no one and he wasn't doing both of them any favors by childishly disregarding it and then escaping the matter altogether when Time began to steal Hiccup away much too soon.

Jack cast his gaze down, somewhat glad that Hiccup wouldn't see such a spineless act; then again, they didn't remain fixed on the bedroom floor for long when his ear picked up Hiccup's quivering voice. "Y-youâ€|you areâ€|" And Jack then found himself staring straight at furious eyes of green. "You are such a _goddamn_ _idiot_."

The Ice Spirit could only gape; when did Hiccup get so close?
"_Excuse me_"

"Of course I want you here!" Hiccup looked to be nearly trembling in anger. "Whatâ€|what got into your head that I wouldn't need you with me? Wouldn't want you with me? What makes you think that I wouldn't miss you, or worry, or justâ€"_augh_" It was an idle thought, but Jack had _never_ seen Hiccup get so worked up over something; it was a little touching to be honest, even if the brunet's little rant did threaten to knick him with furious venom at every word. "_Gods_â€|Just because I'm growing up doesn't mean any of that will change! I'm still _me_â€" and so what if I'm not a _kid_? If I'm going to be an _adult_? Nothing's gonna change because I'll always _need_ youâ€"because I'll always _want_ you!"

This time, it was Jack who found his face heating up, the beginnings of a goofy smile on his lips as the tears stopped leaking while Hiccup stood close enough to beat the living daylights out of himâ€"but as atypical as the teen's actions had been, Jack seriously doubted he'd do that.

Hiccup just seethed and panted for another second or two, muttering something along the lines of, "_Insane_, _demented_, delusional, stupidâ€|"*_ Then, as if mentally reassessing his words and finding them to be as _embarrassing_ as Jack found them absolutely _touching_, the teen flushed a bright red and continued to babble on. "I-I meanâ€|there's nothing wrong with stillâ€|needing a _Guardian_ o-or being a _kid_ _for_ that matter. You know, studies show thatâ€"engaging in moreâ€|_youthful_ activities as an adult helps a lot with creativity, mental health, and staves off depression andâ€"

Jack promptly tuned out the blather, replaying the more important things Hiccup had just saidâ€|and reminisced every moment they had together once its meaning finally sunk in, the pieces falling into place with Valencia's berating words echoing in his head to top it off. However, there was one last thingâ€|

It was honestly surprising how one realization, one revelation could alter a thought, a perception, a perspective. For many, it was an examination of life that lead to a drastic deviation from previous outlooks. For Jack, it was this one little observation that he zeroed in on as he watched with silent awe at how Hiccup's blush crawled all the way to his neck when he was struck with the epiphany: it was the middle of spring and due to Jack's avoidance of the area, the temperature had heated up quite a bitâ€"and Hiccup was _still_

wearing his scarf.

It wasn't very significant to someâ€”after all, the weather was rather mild and it wasn't as though the sun sported a hundred-degree weather to the town of Burgess, but it was more of the fact that Hiccup had survived freezing climates since he was little, had not even flinched when Jack blew that chilling gust of frost in his direction, and even on nights when Jack would attach his arms to him like a starving leech was Hiccup only slightly annoyed by the sudden drop in temperature.

He didn't need the scarf.

But he wore it anyways. And just because Jack was quite hopeful, he was certain the teen wore it on more occasions since his departure than Hiccup would care to admitâ€”the days probably accumulating to around six weeks. Why? Cupid's angry rant resurfaced from his thoughts to answer just that.

He loves you.

At that moment, Jack put Hiccup's little outburst, this one fact, and everything that had happened to them since the moment they met until now, together: a simple equation that provided him with all the answers he needed. And from that, Jack found that he had never wanted to say those three little words more.

So he did.

"I love you."

"Iâ€”_w-what_?" Well, that at least got Hiccup to stop talking.

And just because Jack knew he could never take that declaration back, nor would he ever want to, he committed the most sensible act one could do at a moment like this:

He grabbed Hiccup by the scarf and pulled him into a kiss.

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It was easy enough to form a distractionâ€”threatening to blindly fire her Amor-Arrows always had that catastrophic effect. It was a little insulting how people feared love. So between the others' frantic attempts to duck and cover and Aster's negligent show of bravery, she tilted her aim skywards, released the bowstring, and damn-near prayed it would work.

The resulting fire stirred her dormant weapon, the very tips of her fingers feeling its warmth and pulse and even as Bunnymund's eyes widened as he shouted something unintelligible to her, his boomerangs and frantic grains of Sandy's Dreamsand uselessly chasing after the surge of sparks in tandem, Valencia very nearly fell to her knees as brick and plaster fell around her. She could still hear it, the once-forgotten song that her Eros sang as Amor pierced through the Pole's ceiling with burning passion, the long-yearned symphony of the heart itself.

It was temperate, it was thunderous, it sang of longing and heartbreak, of joy and those three so very clichÃ© words, reaffirming

the insubstantial and immense verity that they held. It was the sound of _love_, of mortal and immortal, of winter winds and daydreamed-dragons, of freckled cheeks and icy touches, of crooked smiles and childish laughs, of viridian green and glacial blueâ€”meeting, melding, a whispered secret gravitating to endless possibilities with a burst of light, a comet's tail, a promise hidden within, as the arrow launched itself to the blues of the sky.

It wasn't a _firework_â€”it was a reverse _shooting_ _star_, exploding into the air, its deafening echo ringing through the clouds to answer that one, cherished wish.

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It was a first kiss, a simple beginning, a sweet little tune for falling stars, diving and twirling as they danced down the infinite skiesâ€”a first wish of love passed from innocent lips, words superfluous, to another, soft and magical offered to none but beating hearts and glittering droplets of hope scattered across the galaxies; a promiseâ€”a promise of a heart's dedication, a lifetime's happiness, of anything and everything, to _be_ that _one's_ _anything_ and everything, the stuff of storybook romances, love letters, pretty poems of the heart's wants and whims, of lovelorn legends and fairytale fables, of amorous melodies, and desirous dramas, and above all of _life_, _because_ simple phrases of _forever_ and _always_ and _happily ever after_ were paltry _travesties_ that pen and song could only cheaply imitate.

This was an awakening, something like _true love's first kiss_ rousing the soul from slumber, veils lifting and hazes dispelled as illusions submerged behind the first vital moments of clarity, instigating the first inklings of eternity, atom-tiny as precautious neurons fired and activated methodical hormones, catalyzing and erupting to a grand fanfare that logic could not touch and verse could only kissâ€”chance inciting, fates intertwined, doubts dashed and faith fortified, _and_ _love_â€”_genuine, authentic, real, and absolute, indisputable, and above allâ€”_ _true_ love opening one's eyes to its _beautiful, lovely, undeniable_ _truthâ€”|

And so when Jack pulled away, he was a bit dismayed at the look of utter astonishment on the teen's face.

Wide-eyed and blushing from the tips of his ears all the way down to his scarf-adorned neck and quietly panting from pinked lips, it seemed a small eon passed between the two, stiff in mutual unease. That is, until these little words tumbled from Hiccup's panting mouth after an audible gulp:

"So uhm...white hairâ€”|huhâ€”|"

Jack felt something catch in his throat, barely croaking out a "What?" in response. He was pretty sure that 'something' was his heart.

Hiccup gave a nod, a shaky grin on his lips. "White hairâ€”|.blue eyesâ€”|" And to prove a point to the flabbergasted Frost Spirit, he even gave an impish smirk that completely and utterly mismatched his heavily blushing face and listed, "â€”|_big ears_."

And all at once, something inside Jack skyrocketed, and he wasn't

sinking anymore; he was drowning and floating at the same time; it was indescribable and it was marvelous " it was love. So of course, after months of wishing, praying, hoping, dreaming for this moment, the first words that flew from the Winter Guardian's mouth were: "Holy shit, YOU CAN SEE ME!" It wasn't the most elegant thing Jack had ever said, but it at least portrayed his unmitigated enthusiasm.

"Yeah," was the teen's winded response, mouth still barely clinging to that small smile. "I can"

"You can see me! Oh god, I was so scared, you have no idea, I almost" And then the realization of his earlier actions made him freeze on the spot, no doubt quite an interesting expression on his face, torn between pure elation and sheer mortification. "I" He gave a graceless cough before clumsily continuing, "I kissed you."

Hiccup gave another short nod, eyes still trained on the Ice Spirit's, his own cheeks coloring just a bit more. "Yeah"you did."

"And I just told you" I love you" Why yes. Jack was very aware that Hiccup was still gawking at him. The Winter Spirit gulped, feeling blood rush to his face and before he could stop himself, a torrent of babbling twaddle erupted. "Look!" I'm sorry, I really am! I, well, I'm not really, I mean, I've been waiting to do that since forever, I-I mean, since I met you"wait, no, yes? But I"

And Hiccup silenced him with a kiss of his own, sweet, simple, and everything Jack could ever want.

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Aster blinked, shocked and immobile. "Well, I'll be da"

Toothiana cut him off right there. "Oh my"

"Hah! I knew it!" North cheered.

And Sandy merely clasped his fingers, a small halo of golden hearts above his head.

Crowded around the single monitor, the Guardians and Deity watched and witnessed it all" fears expelled (for the meantime) and something bright and tender settled onto the scene. Because for the Guardians, it was their friend" their friend holding onto this one happiness, his only, something wonderful and beautiful blossoming between the two, a mutual bliss, a shared devotion, an indisputable love. For Cupid, it was years of waiting, hoping, and losing it all" and gaining something much more in return; faith, hope, and love" above all love" restored.

She would have to thank North for installing the speakers" and Hiccup for leaving the window open.

Red-faced, stunned, and unquestionably relieved and even a bit glad, Aster turned to Valencia, pride depleted along with his energy.

"Yanno" I expect a da" "darn good explanation for all this" but I

s'pose this is where you flaunt your victory?" There was a definite lack of heat in his voice, the words ringing of nothing more than a lighthearted weariness.

Cupid grinned, a dreamy look in her eyes as a welcome warmth weighted itself in her chest. "No, Asterâ€¦I'm not going to gloat," she sighed, eyes never leaving the screen. "I'm not going to ruin this moment with pettiness." And then she snickered. "Though after this, you'll have hell to go through once Jack has a little talk with you all. And I am not going to miss that."

Sandy and Tooth looked to one another uneasily while Bunny could only roll his eyes as he swiveled in his step to turn away from the awkward scene of Jack and that boy of his, doing his best to hide a smile. "Whatever ya pervert. Stop watchin' 'em pash."

At that, there was a not-so-discreet cough from Toothiana as she shielded her eyes away from the private scene of her friend and his mortal love, an embarrassed grin and uncomfortable smile exchanged between Sandy and North before the Guardian of Wonder clapped his hands and turned his friends away from the monitor.

And as for Valencia, the slightest shade of pink tinged her cheeks as she scowled. "Go suck a carrot; I'm enjoying the fruits of my labor."

.

After that last kiss ended, it wasn't long before another one started, this time with Jack's more-than-enthusiastic lips taking the lead. And after that, several more followed and while Hiccup couldn't remember exactly how, they had ended up on the teen's bedâ€¦

â€¦"Not like that!" â€¦" with Hiccup feeling just a little trapped between his headboard and a (crazyhot) Ice Spirit near-literally devouring him. But the teen felt like there wasn't much to worry about; it wasn't like Hiccup was going to get carried awayâ€¦or anything.

Even as kisses peppered his skin, dotting the blushing flesh in a way that his freckles would have envied; a soft press of lips there on his collarbone, a soft bite on his neck, trailing all the way from his jawline to his lips, pinked and sorely bitten to keep the short gasps and sharp intakes of breath from fleeing his mouth.

It wasn't sexual per se, because while Hiccup wouldn't deny that if felt really good, the constant reminder of "I love you," that accompanied every kiss spoke more of passionate affection than heady want. The mouth moving against his own, deliberately languid and soft, sparked desire but was wholly overwhelmed with an undying innocenceâ€¦pure, simple, breathtaking, perfect, and when Jack pulled away, a string of the exact emotions that mirrored his own followed suit. "I love you, I love you, I love youâ€¦" Hiccup almost didn't have the heart to stop Jack's little mantra.

Almost. "You already said that â€¦" Hiccup murmured, dazed and very much in love. He chuckled as, after a sheepish grin, Jack's mouth once again busied itself with the exposed flesh of his shoulder. "And stop treating me like a sample platterâ€¦" he chided, feeling a

warmth stirring in his stomach as the Winter Spirit tugged his scarf to expose more tantalizing skin. Okay, maybe he was getting just a _bit_ carried awayâ€|just a bitâ€|but he'd regain his senses sooner or later.

Not that he really wanted toâ€|

Arms still firmly bound to the teen's lithe waist, Jack gave a disregarding nip to the tip of his nose, earning him a startled laugh. "You seem to be enjoying it." And how Jack delightfully _enjoyed_ making the teen turn red. Besides, he believed he had waited long enough to hold the teen in his arms like this, to be able to kiss him like this, to be able to _love _him like this. The Guardian pressed himself impossibly closer to the brunet, feeling that precious heartbeat flutter in rhythm with his own. "And Iâ€|take it you feel the same?" Because although that second kiss was _marvelous_ and the little fact that Hiccup still had his arms looped around his neck probably indicated so, he still wanted to hear those three tiny words from that _stubborn, sarcastic, sweet_ mouth of his.

And if possible, Hiccup turned redder and his heart raced faster. "_I_â€|" The indignant reply of _idiot_ was at the tip of his tongue, but Jack was giving him a weird, happy, pleading look and Hiccup decided that right now, he could at least come clean since the guy was looking so hopeful. "Yeahâ€|" he gulped, the words "_I love you_â€|" leaping from his throat without direct permission, but Hiccup didn't feel too bothered by that. Plusâ€|Jack looked stunning with that smile and the teen felt his heart hammer in his chest at the sight of it.

"And you believe in meâ€|" the Frost Spirit murmured, forehead against Hiccup's, their breaths mingling while the brunet slowly lost oxygen from being this close or because Jack was staring at him with those gleaming eyes that masked nothing, revealing only love and bliss.

"I believe in youâ€|" Hiccup sighed, burying his head on Jack's shoulder, the scent of winter enveloping him. In that position, the small promise of "_I always will_â€|" did not escape the Guardian's "_big_ _ears_", as Hiccup affectionately dubbed them.

So Jack pulled away only to reach in for another kiss, eyes falling shut at the lovely feel of Hiccup's mouth moving against his own, hands reaching to cup his face after they broke for air. And seeing him, his Hiccup, his _one_, a murmur of silent _thanks_ fell from his lips blending with his audible words, "You can _finally_ see meâ€|"

Eyes of summer's sunset met endless winter, a soft, loving, and euphoric, "Yeahâ€|I finally canâ€|" breathed between them and consumed with yet another kiss.

And on that bright, April dayâ€|snow danced down like white feathers, each fluttering flake a wish, a miracle, and a year of love to come.

* * *

><p>So there we have it.<p>

*=Yes, the little boy North was talking about was an allusion to the child from The Polar Express. And that kind of explains the weird hints about North wanting to say something but keeping it to himself and his references to bells and memories from the previous chapters. And I know that there probably weren't any bells on the modern sleigh North has now, but I imagine his sleigh underwent more than a few modifications through the years. Also, it's an allusionâ€”not the exact same kid and circumstance because while I do love both these tales, they are very different.

*= Sorry if it got confusing, but this is essentially what happened with Hiccup and his belief issue: Yes, North was right the entire time. All Jack needed to do was to show Hiccup he was different from J        but then he fell in love and that complicated the matter. (Enter Cupid's explanation as to why Hiccup can't _fully_ see Jack) The "little push" Cupid mentioned in the last chapter refers to her shooting the arrow and helping Hiccup fall completely in love with Jack. Although, I'm pretty sure the kiss had the same effect as well. And yes, just like that kid from _The Polar Express_, Hiccup possesses something that allows him to always believe: his love for Jack. (Sickly sweet? Yeah, I know    sorry.)

*=Lovely quote from Hiccup in Dragons: Riders of Berk.

Amor= Greek God of Love, also known as Eros, whose Roman counterpart is Cupid.

There are also some allusions to Kate Chopin's The Awakening

-And that's all she wrote-

19. Epilogue I: Epilogues and Evermore

Okay, so maybe this story isn't entirely dead yet, hahaâ€¦I was really planning on updating every once in a while with a one-shot or series of drabbles that depicted what happened after The End, but life gets away from meâ€¦but I've recently heard Viking Hearts by the Miniature Tigers and I decided to finally upload this.

I will try my best to update with mini-stories of this universe, but if this were the last chapter, I feel as though that might just be okay.

****Disclaimer: ****I own nothing but a laptop and certain plot elements.

* * *

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><p>"<em>Darlin', you're the one<em>_
><em>_Please be good to me__
><em>_No one loves you like I do__
><em>_And until death do us part__
><em>_You can have my Viking heart"_
```

- "Viking Hearts" by Miniature Tigers

* * *

><p>Every year, he grew frailer.<p>

The fragile teen blossomed before his very eyes and as time trudged on, he withered as well. That didn't deter Jack's love one bit. Every winter, he would take Hiccup's hand, no matter how shaky it had grown, no matter how liver spots overtook the once-vibrant freckles, and how glittering green eyes dulled to a glow of wisdom from a lifetime of missteps and discoveries. And even as auburn hair slowly faded to a shade that rivaled his own, even as Jack had to slow his steps so that he could showcase this year's creation with half zeal and half worry because while Hiccup never complained, certainly many elder folk had more than their share of things to say regarding the bitter cold and brittle bones, even if Jack had to help push Hiccup in his wheelchair, that'd be okay.

Because he was still Hiccup. The same boy from when he was fifteen and awkward became the same man he was at eighty and venerable.

He lived a good life, filled with friends, family, and love—most importantly love. And though that revered brain of his sometimes slipped, a name or two mixed in confusion, a face or some other forgotten, a wrinkly smile would form and something sparked in his eyes whenever Jack came around, someone and something between them that never failed in memory, as the Guardian of Fun paraded him through the forest to see winter unfold before him.

It became their ritual.

Jack would babble on and on and Hiccup would half-listen, half-turn off his hearing aid, and he would just grin at the Winter Spirit before coughing out a laugh when the Frost Spirit realized Hiccup hadn't caught a word and berate him for it. And every winter, they would complete their little ritual after Hiccup grew too old to play and chase after the Bennett kids as they chased after Jack. And every winter, Jack would present Hiccup with a stunning garden of frost flowers near the lake where ice dragons once roamed and where an Ice Spirit came to the realization that he fell in love with a teenage boy.

And every winter, they would be reminded that Hiccup was (now) eighty and still in love, Jack was (now) three hundred and sixty-six, and very much in love for the last sixty-five of those years. And every winter, they would celebrate all that they have, all that they share, all that they are. Because there was still a them to hold on to.

Except this year.

Anna, the youngest of the Bennett grandchildren, clung to Sophie, one hand grasping the black fabric of her skirt, the other hand grasping Jack's cold fingers. Jack only stared off, dully noting the elegance of the wooden frame, regal and expensive in its rich ochre shade. It was a pretty box that was lowered into the ground. A pretty box where Hiccup's heart slept because it was just that: a very, very long sleep, such a long sleep that eternity fall into slumber along with it as Hel solemnly flicked the lights off and locked the doors of the universe behind her. It was so much simpler to think in those terms because no, it couldn't—he can't—he won't, no, no death was such an ugly word, such an ugly thing, and he refused because Hiccup, his sweet, sweet love, couldn't—nonono—

He can't stand the thought of Hiccup inside such a thing. A grand and imperial looking kind of tomb of wood and satins as Hiccup's chest laid still and his mouth fell silent as his eyes never opened that Sunday morning and no, no, _nononono_!"

The November breeze swept through the procession and Jack couldn't help but think it unfair that they couldn't even have one last winter together. And as the hours droned on, Jack stood, listless and deaf to the tears and cries that bemoaned the loss of a great friend, a godfather, grandfather-figure, not realizing that it was not just those on the invitation list to the funeral who lost a loved one that day. The tears trickled down, but he did not move to wipe it away. Even as Anna was dragged off by her older cousin Max who harshly whispered to her to let the spirit be for a while, Jack did not move. Even as the crowd dwindled, eventually leaving him behind as time oft does and the afternoon grew stale and the sun prepared to retire, he did not move.

And now, there was nothing left but a slab of stone with a name Jack never used etched onto it. On there was _Hamish_, not _Hiccup_ as it should have been, and it was so silly that something as small as a name cut into a piece of rock could bother him so much when all along he knew that it was a cover—a cover of something much deeper that tore at his this was the end and his heart knew it, collapsing into quiet rather than continuing to ache with every beat. He knew it would come to this and he had no regrets. How could he? His short lifetime with Hiccup made him the happiest he had ever been—and now what was left of it would be the most miserable.

But what's done is done and though unsure how, he would make it through. For both of them. At least, that's what he tried to tell himself.

"Winds—take me home," he rasped, wanting to drift away to the skies that no doubt held his beloved somewhere he can't reach. He was met with emptiness, a resounding void that cruelly reminded him just how alone he was. "Winds!" he cried again and was met with nothing. '_Nothing_', _something_ echoed in his mind with such sorrow that he felt himself fall apart at the very seams. And suddenly the grief was back, suffocating him, leaving him breathless as the pain bore down on him, the floodgates crashing open and leaving him to drown, mind dizzy and legs almost giving out from the sheer anguish and he knew he had to get away, had to leave everything behind including the pieces of his broken heart, and he was then _so, so_ glad that not a soul could see him like this, stricken with a loss so overbearing and overwhelming that it threatened to swallow him whole. He gasped and could only inhale his own mourning and he had to get away, had to leave, had to, had to, had to. He wrapped his arms around his stomach, desolation multiplying as the familiar weight of Jākul pressed in vacant comfort against him, the last he has of his love. It was too much. In an agonized gasp, he faced the silent heavens. "Wi—"

"_I heard you the first time._"

And Jack stopped breathing altogether. "Wha—" '_That voice—'_

"I said I heard you the first time. And—I didn't hear a 'please,'" came the sheepish reply and when the Guardian of Winter turned, his

knees nearly buckled at the sight before him.

And it had to be a cruel joke, the small string of sanity snapping with a resounding twang as he made a pitiful attempt to straighten himself and rub his eyes furiously to expel the taunting illusionsâ€|only to find that same, familiar crooked smile barely holding on, quivering to restrain a cry, viridian orbs glimmering with tears bravely unshed.

"_Y-you're hereâ€|"_ Jack sobbed, cautiously stepping towards the same face and figure he only saw in torturous dreams and lovelorn fantasies.

He nodded, strands of auburn dancing with the wind to a choked laugh, a few tears sliding down his freckled cheeks, resolution breaking. "_I'm here_," Hiccup replied with a shaky grin and soon he wasn't able to speak another word as icy lips met his and love and happiness swelled to the size of eternity as Jack wrapped his arms around his thin and gangly frame never to let go, an old habit that not even time could wear away, could never take away.

He brought the other spirit close, as if locking two puzzles in the right place, fitting together perfectly. "You're hereâ€|" Jack whispered again, burying his head atop the other's, the scent of ancient forests and the spray of the ocean swimming through his senses.

"You already said that," the brunet replied as he drew away with a cheeky grin and what else was Jack to do than to smother it with yet another kiss? It was really him. Same sarcasm, same wit, same snarky comebacks. Same viridian eyes, same freckly face, same warmth, same love. It was him. And now there was a _them_ once more.

Them. There was a _them_, there was a _they_, there was a _we_, and there was an _us_. And there always would be.

Hiccup's shout of shock and bliss echoed through the early winter or late fall air as Jack tugged him over the cities and clouds, sunsets promising new beginnings and unwritten endings, the tears in his eyes turning to snow, words refusing to form from his sobbing and gasping mouth at the sight of the forever-fifteen-year-old boy in his arms, looking back at him with the same love and devotion as if they had never been apart, the feel of him returning his embrace, his warmth capable of melting away winter's lonely grip, and the wild winds beneath their feet as they soared in unison, Icarus never falling, nothing else existing for the two cherished wishes come true but that moment, cycling, and everlasting. And sometime after he found his voice again, Hiccup subsequently lost the heart to tell Jack to stop saying, "_I love you, I love you_," over and over again as winds carried them. He didn't need to say it; its sonata sang in their hearts for sixty-five years and would play in everlasting overtures evermore.

With seeing came believing, a tandem, a perpetual cycle of faith against the impossible; with believing came seeing, a topsy-turvy cyclone of chance, fate, and above allâ€" love.

And beneath the display, two figures guarded by, sentinels of the reunion, hidden away by the gnarls of old oaks and golden leaves.

"Soâ€|the Spirit of Autumn, huh?" Bunnymund watched the air around them, swirling and mingling with frost, leaves, and beauty in its intricate design, the two lovers out of sight, alone and together. A perfect paradox. He turned to his ex-partner, an old rival, and an older friend. "What made ya think of that?"

There was a small smile on her lips as she turned to him, a lightness in her heart that never seemed to fade, only briefly forgotten. "Because wherever Autumn isâ€|Winter will follow." And Cupid laughed, further goaded by the bewildered look on Aster's face and the slight disgruntlement that gleamed in his eyes at her corny joke, the bonds of centuries long past breaking away to take the gentle ring off to other skies.

* * *

><p>"Whither thou goest, I will go." â€" Ruth 1:16

* * *

><p>Hiccup became the Spirit of Autumn, the Embodiment of Winds, and eventually the Guardian of Change; concept by yakfrost on Tumblr.<p>

Sorry this was short. I'll have more up in time.

(So uhâ€|I got some people asking for a happy ending? Here it is, a-la Titanic style)

20. Roses and Red: An Extra

Happy Belated Valentine's/Singles Awareness Day! Sorry this was lateâ€|andâ€|I am exactly five days late for the one year anniversary for "I'll See It when I Believe It." Haha, oh time makes fools of us allâ€|

So here's a mini assortment of drabbles based on the shades of red.

****Important: ****This little piece will kick off the drabble/one-shot series I promised after the end of ISIWIBI. Also, if you want a scenario written out or a prompt of some kind, feel free to request! I'll be happy to write something out for you. (I can't guarantee it'll go as you had planned/imagined or even if it'll be very good, but I'll give it my best!) Also, these are extras that take place any time after the 18th chapter of ISIWIBI, including scenarios after the epilogue in no set order.

****Disclaimer: ****I own nothing but a laptop and certain plot elements.

* * *

><p>Pink (Counterpart to Overprotective Dads from my "Better Late than Never" HiJack Week drabbles)

That was a rather lovely shade Hiccup's cheeks just turned. Too bad it was wholly overshadowed by the irritated glare shot in Jack's

direction.

Despite that, the Guardian laughed, far too familiar with the look and far too smug by the knowledge that by the end of the night, his cute boyfriend would still be cuddled up next to him beneath warm bed sheets.

(You knowâ€|unless Hiccup locked him out. Again.)

But then those eyes of green sharpened and the next sound to dribble from Jack's lips were a nervous sort of chortle that sounded far too strained and far too uneasy as he trailed off.

Hiccup sighed. "'_Frost Flower,' '_ Jack?" The brunet's expression crumpled, caught between incredulity and mortification. "'_Frost Flower?!'_"

The Winter Spirit sniffed. "What? I thought it was cute." The tint of rouge deepened and Jack really couldn't stay miffed very long as he witnessed embarrassment override most of Hiccup's aggravation. It was fun watching the play of emotions across his dry-humored teen. "Very fitting, for my cute boyfriend," he added with a smirk lingering on his lips.

It was also a rather interesting transition from red and flustered to caustic and callous. "Okay, A: I'm not cuteâ€|don't you _dare_ say otherwise." Jack's mouth promptly fell shut. "And B: That wasn't my point."

The Ice Spirit reclined in his position, stretching out languidly on the middle of the teen's bed. "Well then, what was your point?"

"_Y-youâ€|!_" Hiccup sucked in a breath; no, no, his father was across the hall sleeping. Just because his boyfriend decided to be this aggravating this late at night, that did not warrant his father to come bursting in through his doors at the commotion. So he'd best make his argument as adroit as possible: "You did that on purpose," Hiccup accused.

Jack didn't even bother to feign an innocent expression. "Did what?" Apparently, he had gotten _too_ _used_ to Hiccup being none-the-wiser about the stark contrast between his telltale expressions and his tone.

"_Jack_â€|" the brunet gritted out. "You intentionally left those flowers there for my dad to findâ€|didn't you?"

Well, no point in hiding it now; not that he was trying very hard. "And what if I did?" Jack sat up, challenging blue gaze aimed straight at the teen.

Hiccup, on the whole, was unimpressed. "I don't know about you, but I think I'd have kind of a hard time explaining to my dad that I'm dating _Jack Frost._"

The Guardian raised a brow. "Is that what you're worried about?"

"Uh, _YES_?" A bubble of frustration rose to his throat at the bland

stare he received. Hiccup groaned. "Jack, what if he takes this seriously? What if he demands to meet you?"

"Okay, first off," the Winter Spirit countered, "I _am _serious." When it came to Hiccup, he always was. That resolute stare was proof of that. "Second, I think he's too much in shock to try and interrogate you."

The bubble was subsequently popped by the spike of guilt. Hiccup didn't quite mean it like _that_. "And what do I tell him once he does?" Still, that didn't mean that he still wasn't irritated by the gesture. The teen scoffed. "That the Spirit of Winter staked a claim on me?"

Something darkened in those eyes of blue as the demand, "Didn't I?" fell from his mouth.

The brunet hated the silence that followed as he floundered for the right words to say.

Hiccup wanted to ask, '_What has gotten into you?_' He really did. But Hiccup recognized that defensive little flare in those cool, glacial irises. Hiccup had a feeling that this little stunt bore more behind it than the Guardian's usual antics. Now that it was confirmed, the teen was at a bit of a loss. A part of him definitely wanted to protest—the idea of being _owned _was definitely unsettling—but he really didn't want to delve into that mess right now. Not when he knew there was a difference in what Jack was saying and what Jack really meant. Not when there was a sulking Winter Spirit right before him and not when Hiccup was a sucker when it came to dealing with the Guardian's distress.

The brunet conceded with a sigh. "And you felt the need to not-so-subtly inform my dad of that?" he prodded. And just because he knew it was probably the right thing to do, Hiccup edged closer to him.

"Not—_just_ your dad," came the quiet admittance. "I mean, it's only _proper_ if he knew, right? But ah—"

This? _Again?_ Hiccup sighed and expectedly felt that guilt steadily mount. Still, an inkling of worry pervaded him, as it always did when this topic came about. Then again, that didn't stop Hiccup from remarking, "Oh _please_, no one's just waiting around the corner to sweep me off my feet when I least expect it." Really. The thought itself was laughable.

Against himself, Jack snickered. "Oh what, I don't count?"

And there came that dry humor he had been expecting to hear all night. "Yes, I was hopeless against your irresistible charms." Despite the saturated sarcasm, the light pink of his face told Jack that maybe there was a grain of truth to be told. "Besides—we're already dating so you kinda already—_have_ me."

"And I intent to _have _you for as long as I can—and I'd prefer not to take any chances." Hiccup was fairly sure it was Jack that made the first move since one moment he had been looking right at him and now he found himself pressed flush against a frost-streaked hoodie. But he wasn't complaining. "Besides, there's nothing wrong with

lavishing affection to my Frost Flower, is there?" Not when he welcomed that embrace. Not when it eased a bit of the bitterness away.

Jack knew.

Hiccup knew.

One day, (tomorrow or decades down some desolate devastating road) maybe they wouldn't be able hold like each other like this; that one day, their love would merely fade as a Once upon a time that never really met its Happily ever after. Maybe one day, they'd find each other in the arms of another—and it was very likely for one and absolutely certain for another. Time was merciless in that sense and such was the reality between a mortal boy and an immortal spirit.

Or maybe it wouldn't.

Maybe they'd stay like this, their hearts dancing away to the same rhythms of the same sweet melody as it did now, blithe and beautiful all at once, an intricate and simple song composed of contented sighs, giddy laughter, the messy shuffling of sheets and bated breaths, and three little words that held all the meaning in the world.

Yes—maybe they would. But Hiccup wasn't really willing to take any chances either. And besides—it was—actually really sweet, getting that bouquet. A little cheesy, quite romantic, and very Jack.

Speaking of which, said Ice Spirit was already grinning quite widely (the cheeky little—) before Hiccup could even voice out his obvious response.

"Nothing—too extravagant. Please," the brunet implored.

Jack couldn't keep the grin off his face even if he tried. "Sorry, can't promise that." And just because he knew he could, he pulled the irritated teen into a kiss. And because Hiccup was feeling rather forgiving at that moment, he succumbed to another (and another, and another).

Thus, the latter part of the night was spent showing Hiccup just how grateful Jack was.

The next morning, as Stoick Haddock backed his car out of the garage to start the new work day, he was met with—quite an unusual sight. Very unusual. Actually, downright shocking and perplexing: the whole exterior of his house caked in a dense layer frost ferns. In the shape of hearts.

Hours later, Jack spent the better part of that night begging Hiccup to be let back in.

****Rose****

People have compared love to a rose. It was both a mockery and accurate to a certain degree.

Has one ever noticed how ugly a rose truly is?

Valencia did.

The menacing splendor that beguiles the unaware, the thorns that drive into the oblivious, and the candied scent of temptation that masks the scent of poison so wellâ€”they are not lost to her. This was a truth that she long carried, merrily stowed in the back of her mind, leaving to froth and ferment like delicious wine laced with venom.

And in her long life, she found that love was unique in its own way of expression: never good, nor bad, nor pure, nor wholly tainted; love thrives, dies, and lives once more in different hearts, different souls. Love keeps secrets, pays the price for the lies that bonds the two together that strengthens and weakens with time and action, in what is done and not, in what is remembered and what is forgotten. Love is simple, love is complex, love is acceptance, love is prejudice, love is sacrifice, love is gain, and loveâ€”is so _greatly _exaggerated.

Because she finds that love is like this too.

Between a mortal boy and a spirit of ice, a simple and beautiful bliss between them through years of laughs, tears, arguments, kisses, and misses, the love-light in their eyes do not dim, and so she finds there is hope. Hope, such a marvelous little word, four lettered and holds so much depth and despair, much like her own convoluted truthâ€”her own horrifying masterpiece. Betwixt the complexities, behind the distortions, beneath the tangles and knots of black silk and red threads, there was a lovely simplicity thereâ€”pure and wonderful. Of happiness shared, affections and passions passed through simple phrases, a touch of warmth, a chilling thrill, a bond dotted with stumbles and scrapes and soaring flights, never perfect, always beautiful.

And joy bursts forth like supernovas in the void-less universe**.**

Because it was _love_ and it was there, thriving in this world of distrust and heartbreak, budding like stubborn weeds beneath cold concrete, pushing to meet the sun's rays and kiss the skies. It was simple: it was believing, it was accepting, it was sacrifice, it was _so simple._ A forgotten tune, its words misplace after years of cadenzas and dissonance, a pretty melody of simple joys and sweet emotions that made one's heart flutter with the ceaseless and endless cadence of _love_. And it livesâ€”it truly doesâ€”within the very core of all Cupid's lost and lonely gallery of hearts.

So she learns to laugh again, pouring her bliss and blessings to this one fated pair, petals of flora and frost dancing beneath her feet, her song echoing through every heart wonderfully and irrevocably snared by her thorns:

"Cherish this ecstasy*

From this moment on;

Through every second's frenzy

As darkness fades to dawn.

Light, as far as eyes have seen

Have lifted this truth above:

That you have always been

_And will always be _loved_."_

****Scarlet****

Autumn can be a callous season, a painful reminder of the days slipping past, winds brewing and flinging fate down diverging directions; life drains from the earth, hollowing out the sweetness of summer, a chaotic fall from the summit of one equinox to the other.

But not to Jack.

To Jack, Autumn was gentle rains and thundering storms keeping time with a heartbeat; the regal and earthy palettes of cascading leaves and the midday breezes that cradled each fiery fragment to its final bed; a kiss blown to the winds itself and knowing that wherever he was, it would carry his affections and return it to his love.

It was freckled cheeks, pinked by blustery days and afternoons sweeping through forests and woods, painting the world in hues of gold and scarlet. It was green eyes, bright and inquisitive, warm and sly as dry-as-leaves-humor tumbled from his lips, lips chapped from busying teeth and wintry kisses from an icy counterpart.

It was the victim of a surprise attack with ice and snow nipping at his heels—the disruption of a quiet day of tedious tasks that November noon in favor of dodging the icy blasts of sleet and snow: a whole hour's worth of fall leaves still needed to be painted, now embraced in Winter—

—“Much like the Spirit caught in the final and first season's grip.

"_Jack, what have I told you about attacking me out of nowhere?"_

"_What have I told you about running?"_

"_When you're being attacked, that's kinda instinct."_

"_When you're Winter, it's kinda instinct to follow." _

There was an airy laugh from the boy beneath him, looking breathtaking and at home among the fallen foliage, crowned by speckles of fall's loveliest shades. "_You know, there are other ways of getting my attention."_

"_Yeah_" the boy of Winter murmured, inches before capturing his lips. "_But this was the most fun_"

"_Chasing me?"_

There was a laugh at that. "_Nope_." It wasn't a chase, not anymore. Not when this came to them so naturally, embrace of two seasons, meeting somewhere in between. And they both knew it.

"_Was it necessary for you to ruin my leaves?"_

"_No_." His lips curled to a smirk. "That_ was for fun."_

An irritated flash of green eyes were the last he had seen before the slightest press of lips against his own were felt, a teasing phantom of affection; what followed was Jack sprawled against the forest floor, the boy gone from beneath him, Autumn melting into the air with a haughty chuckle.

Jack shook his head; maybe it was a chase after all. But still, he smiled, feeling the warmth tingle from his lips, warming his heart.

Yes, he was very much in love with Autumn.

Now if only his precious love would quit being so stingy about leaves.

.

Winter can be a cruel season; he had known that as a child. Ice and rime plagued his nightmares in the earliest years of adolescence, the bitter chills sinking into his bones and the resounding loneliness of the season aching his heart at skies of gray and nights of howling darkness.

But not to Hiccup. Not anymore.

To Hiccup, it was shrieks of delight come the wondrous morning to find the earth blanketed by a loving layer of snow; the intricate patterns of frost left by a gentle touch across the earth, a greeting, a confident reminder of its seasonal rule; a snowflake or two kissing his cheeks, the cold nipping his nose, and warm smiles that melted his heart despite the flurry of flakes that trailed after him in every step.

It was icy hands that gripped him tight with the intention of never letting go. It was fun and laughter reserved for all those who believed and the silent moments of awe from those who had forgotten and rediscovered. It was eyes of blue, honest and beautiful, that had long since eased painful memories for years of love and joy.

It was an expected (yet unexpected) nuisance during the looming end of Autumn, forcing the startled Spirit to give into the chase, winds and fall leaves making for a telltale trail for the boy of ice to follow, a whole hour's work of the forest now abandoned to Winter's possessionâ€

â€"Much like his heart.

Maybe the other saw it, maybe not, but he slowed his pace, allowing his winds to carry him adrift, right before the playful impact that pushed them to leafy grounds.

"_Jack, what have I told you about attacking me out of

nowhere?"_

"_What have I told you about running?"_

"_When you're being attacked, that's kinda instinct."_

"_When you're Winter, it's kinda instinct to follow." _

And really, after all these years, there was still that innocence and earnestness in those eyes of blue that clenched at his heart with the accompaniment of that tired, old phrase. "_You know, there are other ways of getting my attention."_

"_Yeah_" the boy of Winter murmured, inches before capturing his lips. "_But this was the most fun_"

The Spirit of Autumn turned away. "_Chasing me?"_

There was a laugh at that. "_Nope_" It wasn't a chase, not anymore. Not when this came to them so naturally, embrace of two seasons, meeting somewhere in between. And they both knew it.

Still, the decorated ground was reminder enough to deter his advances. "_Was it necessary for you to ruin my leaves?"_

"_No_" Winter's lips curled to a smirk. "That _was for fun_"

And really, some things never changed. He gave him a dry look, one that the other was quite familiar with already before Autumn sealed their mouths in a kiss, light, teasing, and playful, a hint of a promise before he faded to the skies, a haughty chuckle thrown to the wind. Work came firstâ€"play came later. But he's always make time for love.

And he knew Jack would come after him and they'd repeat this cycle again and again, happily, wonderfully.

Yes, he was very much in love with Winter.

Now if only his dear lover would quit messing with his season.

.

Some years, Winter would come early, freezing chills and snowstorms creeping earlier in the calendar. Some years, the trees retained their beautiful shade long into the holiday seasons. It was a playful tug-of-war between two perspectives, a seemingly petty argument between lovers between clashing ideals of design.

But over the years, there would be this miraculous calm betwixt the two seasons, frost intermingling with the streaks of red and gold of forests, something like a moment of truce, a kiss on the cheek as an apology before the other grudgingly conceded.

And to many, it was incredible, a sense of elation, adrift in hazy skies and fall leaves.

For years this was so, winds of change meeting with snowstorms and ice, bringing an essence of sheer and simple loveliness to the year's

end. It never failed to arrive, a promised encounter, a fated union, a phenomenon of absolute adulation and infallible rapture after all these years.

Because after all these yearsâ€|they were still in love.

****Lust****

It perhaps began with the unease that mingled in the air, a soft anxiousness that dripped across fervid and tender actions from stolen moments into the night.

"_Don't stop."_

_Eyes of ice widened. "Wh-what?" A stutter. A gulp. Doubtful look. Wishful thinking. _

Eyes of summer's end held a resolute gaze before mouths met again in heat and longing.

The teen pulled away, murmuring a command that resonated through the Guardian's very core.

"_Don't stop."_

Perhaps it was with the way his grip trembled with desperation against pinked flesh that made the teen's mouth gasp in delight and pain, the way his lips and teeth bore marks down and across his face, neck, and chest, wherever it could reach, wandering to blemish his own brand of perfection to his lover.

"_A-ahâ€|" Eyes close, fingers clench, bodies writhe. _

_Above him, Winter stills, entranced by the display. _

Perhaps it was the way the ice enclosed around them in possessive passion, the hues of frost and fire melding together and melting into the sensations of love, ardor, and worship that shamed the shades of starlight.

_Greedy eyes absorb everything. Every shiver, every gasp, every reaction he could possibly evoke. _

An exploration, an experiment, a discovery, a first.

It was sloppy, with awkward touches and inexperienced hands, searching aimlessly against expanses of flesh, curious and drunkenly exhilarated by the novel thrum of adrenaline and a stronger dose of a dizzying drug called lust dancing down their veins.

There was a gasp, shared between lips, teeth, tongue swallowed by the baritone or a groan drifting to the heated night air. Shame and humiliation were drowned by out by the mounting ache of desire, a mutual zeal ravaging through their bodies.

_He bit his lip. "O-oh Godsâ€|" _

He stopped. "Are youâ€|"do you want me toâ€|" "

Grip tightened on the other's shoulder, a shuddering breath exhaled to the air. "I'm fineâ€|" A whimper. "Slowlyâ€|" he amends.

_And the Guardian complies, drowning in the feeling of tight heat and each quavering note his lover emits as they clumsily built a rhythm.

_

In the back of Hiccup's mind, amongst the tangles of frenzied kisses and teasing tongues that slid against his skin and the way his legs wrapped around Jack's hips to keep him close as each thrust burned pleasantly through his body, gently, roughly, hasty, and torturously slow enough to let his sanity dangle by tiny spider-threadsâ€"

_It subsequently blanked. _

Vision blurred. Eyes shut. Mouths open.

A total eclipse of white.

There was a muffled cry, Jack swallowing Hiccup's scream as the younger slipped further and further into the Guardian's hold, something primal, something impassioned and animalistic, utterly subdued by daunting devotion and avaricious affection.

There was a gentle smile from Jack, met with a light kiss from the sixteen year old boy.

Hiccup held him close, heart to heart, each beat a lullaby to the other.

* * *

><p>I gave Valencia a drabble, considering it was her holiday after all haha ^^;<p>

*= _Cherish this Ecstasy_: based on the essay by the same name by David James Duncan. It's a wonderful piece and though a little odd sounding at first, it is one of the most profound essays I have ever read.

So uhâ€|ta-dah?

(sinks back slowly into the abyss)

End
file.